

Supporting Refugee Students

**Winding Pathways: Supporting Refugee Students in High School**

**A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of One EAL Teacher in Manitoba**

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree

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**Abstract**

The educational landscape for Manitoba has continued to shift with the arrival of many immigrants. In particular, there has been a noticeable increase in the numbers of refugee students in our schools who may have experienced interruptions in their education. Their presence in our schools brings unique challenges for teachers and school systems. This narrative inquiry explores my lived experiences as an English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher in a Manitoba high school working with refugee students who have had their learning interrupted due to a variety of reasons. I examine three main topics: the challenges and successes I have experienced while working with this particular group of EAL learners; how these experiences have impacted me in the past; and how they inform what I do now and in the future as I navigate through a new professional landscape. My goal is to provide readers with a firsthand account of what it is like to be an EAL teacher working with refugee students and some of the issues that have emerged as I worked and lived alongside these students in a Manitoba context. My hope is that this narrative inquiry will shed some light on how teachers might work with these students to help them succeed in high school.

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**Dedication**

*In honour of my parents*

*Jose and Everalina Pacheco*

*And in honour of all newcomers who have a story to tell*

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### Prologue

**Found Poem** written October 18, 2011 taken from captions as I hovered over pictures of pathways on the internet.

### Winding Paths...

**Keep sightlines short.**

**This is how I started my lifetime of personal growth.**

**Nervous, anxious, conversations with strangers.**

**How do I use my fears to find my passion?**

**When I began, I entered a forest, followed winding paths and emerged blind.**

**Reminiscent of a journey**

**the winding path led to doors,**

**promises of lush landscapes,**

**blasts, piles and barriers**

**nestled around the next corner.**

**I wandered and wondered about logic.**

**Mystical paths lined with books,**

**become paths  
of knowledge.**

**Chapter One: Uncharted Paths<sup>1</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> Lencois Maranhenses, Brazil, August, 2010

### **Coming to My Inquiry: Narrative Beginnings**

I look outside and the sky is grey. I am writing from the comfort of my bed with my pajamas on, as I am home for Remembrance Day. Yesterday I attended the ceremony at my younger daughter's school. She asked me to come and watch the dance they had choreographed to commemorate this important day in our country. I am drawn back to the feelings I had as I became part of her story on that particular November day. I look at my calendar and think, another Remembrance Day service at school. This is my seventeenth year of services and I still look forward to them every year.

### **Memory of a Remembrance Day Service - November 11, 2010**

*I am running late from another meeting at work. I am worried that if I don't speed up, I will miss her performance. I already missed her cheerleading dance yesterday by minutes and I cannot bear to let her down again. I am frazzled, cold and nervous as I breeze into the school. Instantly I am warm as I enter. I arrive just in time to hear the angelic voices of elementary students singing our national anthem. They are singing in French and I am amazed at how loud and clear they are. I look ahead to the entrance of the dim-lit gymnasium and stop before entering. They are still singing. I must stop and be respectful. Before long, I feel the tears in my eyes. My throat hurts from the tightening and I cannot muster one single word of the anthem. I realize this experience is interwoven with my story of the three refugee students who spoke at the Remembrance Day ceremony ten years previously when I was teaching at a high school. I hear them saying, "when you hear Oh Canada, think of our stories," and I feel the emotion and reverence in a way I had never felt before.*

**Memory of a Remembrance Day Service - November 11, 2000**

*“Would everyone please rise for the playing of our national anthem?”*

*The song began to play and I knew it would not be long before tears filled my eyes and I would have to grasp the chair in front of me for balance. I always get emotional when I hear it. The voices of the singers are so pure. I feel overcome with pride, joy and a great deal of fear.*

*The gym is hot with 900 students crammed onto the floor. The teachers stand on the periphery, carefully making their presence known and being sure to keep the silence on this Remembrance Day. It is always a challenge to keep the students quiet on such occasions, but this ceremony was one that I will never forget.*

*The three speakers-two boys and one girl-come onto the stage wearing jeans and hoodies and carrying their notes. It was a writing piece they had composed with my help to present in front of an audience. It was meant to be a means of storytelling and healing all at once. I was nervous for them as they walked to the stage in front of 900 students sharing something so personal.*

*Almost immediately, the crowd hushes and one of the students on the stage clears his throat. He is ready to begin speaking and I am sure this boisterous suburban school is listening. Today they will share their stories. As their teacher, I want nothing more than for others to understand what they had witnessed and survived. Once they hear, they can empathize. Theoretically, this should help teachers to work with these*

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*students. I had asked if they could present at this year's ceremony and the proposal was accepted. The speech I helped them write will help them find their own voices. I will help them to be heard and it will validate that they belong in our school. But I am uneasy. I am scared that these courageous young people will not be able to follow through with their speech and the audience will not understand them. I am terrified the audience will not be quiet and the message of peace will be lost.*

*But to my surprise, the gym is silent and they command the attention of the audience by their simple presence. The first boy begins to speak and my heart is in my throat.*

*Liridon: Hello, I am Liridon.*

*Vlora: I am Vlora.*

*Mentor: And I am Mentor.*

*Vlora: We are from Kosovo. During the spring of 1999 our families fled from our homeland in Kosovo. We were chased out of our country by the Serbians. We were forced to start a new life in Canada. Today we will tell you our personal stories.*

*Liridon: Believe us, we've been at death's door. We were very scared. We waited for death at every moment. Are they going to kill us now or later? For 15 long days we hid in our basement, waiting to see if we would be caught or not. We could hear everything outside, the gunfire and people screaming... dying.*

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*Mentor: We heard that Arkan, the Serbian leader who was known as the cruelest and harshest man, had sent out his army to kill all Albanians. They burned all of our homes and belongings. Even the police couldn't protect us. They were Serbians too.*

*Vlora: They gave us five minutes to leave our homes or they said we would be killed slowly by cutting us up into pieces little by little in front of our families. We reacted quickly. There was no time to take anything with you. Even if you did, they would only take it away from you. I managed to wear two pairs of jeans and layers of clothing. I wanted to be warm because we did not know if we would find shelter quickly.*

*Liridon: Once we left our homes the Serbians mocked us by making every Albanian walk for hours, days, around our city, Prishtina. They gave us no reasons. It was pure humiliation. They finally led us to the train station.*

*Mentor: At the train station, the atrocities were huge. A woman was giving birth and people were dying, especially the old. Next we were herded like animals onto trains and buses to Macedonia, Montenegro or Albania. It was survival of the fittest. Those who were strong enough to get on and drag their families on the train made it. Those who couldn't get on the train were sent to prison. Most are still there.*

*Vlora: They tormented us by taking nine hours to complete a two-hour trip. Fifty people shared a space that was meant for eight. We stopped needlessly at every town. They held up their guns and threw rocks at us as we passed by. We never knew what would happen next.*

*Liridon: At the last stop, the train conductor got drunk and drove the train dangerously. We were never sure of whether we were going to Macedonia or to our*

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*death. On the way to Macedonia, we could see people lying on the side of the road, massacred. They showed us this to scare us.*

*Mentor: Before we were allowed into Macedonia, these were the choices. We could give them our gold or they would cut off our fingers and ears for it. We had to give them money or risk being beaten or killed. Some girls were even raped in front of their own fathers.*

*Vlora: Two kilometres before Macedonia, we were told another lie. We were told to walk on the railway tracks because there were landmines on each side. This made it easier for them to control us, steal our money or kill us.*

*Liridon: We barely made it to Macedonia. Finally we got to the border of Macedonia and Kosovo. This was horrible. We thought it would be salvation, but instead it was raining and cold for days. No food, no water, no washrooms, and absolutely no shelter.*

*Mentor: We couldn't take the smoke in our eyes anymore from people trying to build fires. We were overtired and people were starting to act crazy. Some people didn't even recognize their own families. Some even went as far as attempting suicide.*

*Vlora: The 300,000 people had to move. If you had family in Macedonia, you would go with them and live in their homes. If not, you were sent to a camp.*

*Liridon: We stayed at the camp for months. It was there that we signed up to seek refuge anywhere in the world. We were sent to the peaceful country of Canada.*

*Mentor: Now we are here in a true free country. We hope for peace.*



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*Vlora: War is not a game, trust us. No one should have to feel the pain of war or be forced to leave their homeland. Think about our story the next time that you hear the Canadian anthem, "O Canada". (Co-written story publically read at a service in 2000)*

Over ten years ago, I heard their voices and knew that the risk of sharing their personal stories with the school outweighed the challenges of language, teenage attitudes and reliving the trauma. I was their EAL teacher but now I knew much more was needed than just teaching these students. I had a responsibility to myself, to the students and to the school to make some changes. My students were the priority during this time. But without reflecting on my own experiences with them, I could not become a better EAL teacher. It was the power of their stories that made me realize I had more work to do. I knew that being a resource teacher simply was not enough and I had so much more to learn. I realized at that point that I had an obligation to continue my own development in the area of learning English as an additional language. Little did I know how much the impact of their story would have on my life and the experiences that I had lived would shape my desire to pursue EAL as a full-time career working in public schools.

As I think about those three students, I wonder what they are currently doing. Did they manage to get jobs or careers that they are happy at? Once they graduated from high school, did they continue learning in adult EAL classes in order to improve their reading? I was their EAL teacher but I was not the case manager who looked after the planning for their future plans. Many questions linger in my mind in regards to these students. Moving backwards in my experiences with them, I realize that so much was not done to properly prepare for their needs. I truly believe that we as part of a system simply did not know what to do when these students arrived in our schools at that time.

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When they entered high school, they were older than the other students and they were all placed in the same grade. I met them in the first year when I had moved to the community high school as a resource teacher. I had already known they were in the high school because I had been teaching their siblings at the middle school in 1999-2000. The school division had never received students from a local agency that assisted refugees and this group of Kosovars was new. The schools did their very best to try and understand this group of students who were entering the primarily white Anglo-Saxon population and there was a large learning curve. Although they were refugees, all three had some prior education. However, due to the war, they had experienced long interruptions in their schooling, and that schooling was vastly different than the education they were getting in Winnipeg. Many times they commented on the differences in pedagogy, such as the emphasis to learn individually instead of cooperatively, as well as the differences in methodology such as the focus on rote learning in Kosovo.

Many times I think about the experiences these three students had in their Canadian high school years. Although they did graduate with the acknowledgement that they were EAL learners, I question if we really did all that we could for them. We did provide them with support through the use of educational assistants in the classroom so they could achieve EAL credits. Even though their education in Kosovo had been cut short, their previous education probably was completely different than the Canadian school system. These students came from cultures where they learned strictly by rote or where literacy may have been achieved using political or religious texts only. I wonder how stressful that must have been for both the students and the assistants working with them in Manitoba. Kanu's (2008) article referred to African refugees who were placed in

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grades based on their age in Canada even though they had experienced interruptions to their schooling due to war. One Sudanese refugee student said:

By the time we were finally accepted to come to Canada last year, I was already 17 years old and they put me in grade 11 when we arrived . . . even though I was not going to school for almost five years, so grade 11 is very tough for me . . . but they put me with the others at grade 9 for learning English. (Kanu, 2008, p. 925)

Should we have placed the three students back in grade 9 to learn English and catch up on concepts they were never taught? I wonder how much extra time they would have needed to be taught the content for the first time, learn the language and then do the same assignments that were adapted to the curriculum. Surely there was more I could have done. I wonder how difficult it must have been for them to be expected to sit and participate in a Canadian classroom without having much more than basic mathematical skills and without the opportunity to have ever developed critical thinking skills that are often demanded from our Canadian students. I also wonder how difficult it must have been being terrified of not knowing what anyone was saying or, how frightening navigating through our crowded hallways, not understanding the linguistic landscape was for them. I think of how difficult it must have been for them to focus on academics while worrying about finding a job, repaying their tickets back to the Canadian government, and sending back money to family members who were still back in Kosovo. Finally, I wonder how many nights these students woke up with night terrors and then were

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obligated to come to school the next day without dealing with the pain they were experiencing emotionally and/or physically because of the brutality of war.

When I coauthored the Remembrance Day story with these three students, I took a risk. For me, their story meant I could better understand the circumstances of their arrival to our school. Refugees in this community were a new phenomenon and I knew I had to grow in knowledge and empathy so as a teacher I could be more beneficial for them as well as for the other teachers. Their story demystified their arrival and brought to mind the realities of how and why they were now in our school. The sharing of their story left a lasting impression. As a parent, a teacher, a human, my heart and brain were altered. I was no longer the same teacher or the same person.

The impact of hearing the students' stories was also felt by the school community. Both the teachers and other students were now privy to the tragic circumstances the three presenters had so candidly shared with them. More importantly, the effect was felt on a deep level. Teachers were more empathetic to the students and began to comprehend what it must have been like for these kids as they fled, as well as finding the courage to share something so private with the entire school. On a systemic level the teachers were awakened to the past experiences of these students and the effects these experiences could have within the school system. The staff was now able to discuss the students with a shared interest as they felt they had gained some insight into what the three were bringing into their classes on a daily basis. The teachers were now more connected to the lives of these newcomers.

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The rest of the students were also deeply impacted by this sharing experience. The annual Remembrance Day ceremony was no longer the voice of a soldier who had been on a peacekeeping mission thousands of miles away. It was no longer the voice of an aged veteran who had fought in a war decades before they were born. It was real. The ceremony became the reality. Three teenagers were in front of the school. Many students had tears running down their cheeks and others looked away to avoid crying as they heard the harsh reality of their classmates' experiences.

Change was felt by many. Although this may sound like a cliché, it was the truth in actuality. The impact was evident, and in the hallways there was a deeper sense of understanding. In one form or another, some change was all I had hoped when I ventured into coauthoring the story with Vlora, Mentor and Liridon. The process was emotionally wearing like fighting waves in rough waters. But the waters calmed and the ripples lingered for many years to come.

Time has moved ahead 13 years and I am in a space where I am invited to listen to the voices of these students and others with whom I have worked. I can now pay closer attention to my own voice within my experiences. I move to “a time and place where my voice, along with all the other voices present, is encouraged to participate in arriving at a different place of knowing” (LeMay, 2002, p. 2). As I reflect on my own experiences and the memories collected in my journals, I wonder how my life has changed since my first experiences with students from war-affected backgrounds who experienced gaps in their learning due to the war. I sense it was the uncertainty of what to do with the memories and stories that helped shape this inquiry. I realize the sense of becoming

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comfortable with myself and my own voice as I move forward with more clarity “and increasing understanding about who I am in relation to others” (LeMay, 2002, p. 2).

**Chapter Two: Pathways to Higher Ground<sup>2</sup>**



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<sup>2</sup> Viñales Region, Cuba, February, 2010

### **Situating My Inquiry Theoretically: A Review of the Literature**

I have always considered myself a person who is full of hope. As a child, I had always hoped to become a teacher, and as an adult, I hope that I have given my own daughters the right amount of love, wisdom and values so they too can realize their dreams in the future. Hope is a word that can be used easily and carelessly. It is part of my day-to-day language. I had not stopped to think about how much the word actually meant with regards to my teaching experiences until I began this narrative journey. In the teaching landscape, I came to realize that when working with refugee students who have experienced interruptions to their schooling, hope was and always would be an essential part of my experience with them. Hope is the driving force that has kept me going all these years.

At times working with EAL refugee<sup>3</sup> students has been extremely challenging but I always have hope to keep me moving forward. It has been the mixture of my personal hope and the need to foster the hope of the students in their new environment that keeps me seeking out new ways to become a better teacher and find new ways to support other teachers.

One of my colleagues who has a PhD and coauthored a book retired this year. She was kind enough to share her newly published book with me: *The Hopeful Brain: Relational Repair for Disconnected Children and Youth* (Baker and White-McMahon, 2011). Although much of her research revolved around the northern communities of

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<sup>3</sup> Refugee refers to someone who has been forced to leave their home and country and arrive in Canada carrying the trauma the experiences that have forced them into flight, (Manitoba Education, 2011). The term newcomer refers to any recent immigrant who arrives in Manitoba. This is an umbrella term for any person that arrives regardless of legal status. English as an Additional Language (EAL) is the general term being used for the area of instruction focused on teaching English to students whose primary language is not English. Students can be newcomers, refugees and EAL learners independently or interdependently.



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Canada, I could not help but make the shift to how her work applied directly to what I was doing in my current research. As stated in the introduction of her book,

“Disconnected children and youth desperately need hope to be courageous in life...

Without hope, our brains and bodies would constantly react, rather than respond, to the ecologies around us in ways that are far from beneficial. We are our experiences. They shape who we are and who we will become”(Baker and White-McMahon, 2011, p.7).

The quote applied to me on two levels. First, I could see the connection to the youth arriving in my classroom full of hope for a new life. On another level, the quote spoke to me in regards to the writing I am doing. I want to respond to the teacher’s voice in literature through my own inquiry in order to inform and perhaps even transform my own teaching and the teaching of others. So it was with the acknowledgement and presence of hope shaping my research from the perspective of self-study that I began my journey into the literature.

### **Hope as a Major Narrative Thread of this Inquiry**

As I journeyed into the literature further I explored hope as a major narrative thread within my inquiry. I have many hopes for the future of myself as an EAL Curriculum Support Teacher, for other EAL teachers and for students. Closely linked to resilience is the idea that hope is crucial to the survival of refugee students, particularly if they have come from previous tumultuous personal histories as well as the EAL teacher working with refugees. With hope as a personal anchor in the transition to the new educational environment, many families move from past negative experiences to an optimistic future. Often times, this new prospective future in a new land comes with challenges that outweigh the optimism of the family.

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There has been an explosion in the study of hope over the past three decades (Elliot, 2005 as cited in Li & Larsen, under review). The study of hope has been “beneficial in virtually every circumstance which has been researched including academic, athletic and psychological domains” (Cheavens, Michael and Snyder, 2005; Murphey & Carpenter, 2008 as cited in Li & Larsen, under review). Hope has been related to both personal and academic successes. Hope can also be a factor in the transition that newcomers make to their new countries and is seen as crucial to survival. Survival can be generalized for both the learner and the teacher as they both navigate new landscapes. For me, it is this hopefulness that guides me into the future as I continue to support EAL learners and teachers.

One perspective in the literature pertaining to hope in the educational contexts that has been investigated is the work done by Li, Mitton-Kükner & Yeom (2008) and their exploration of thinking narratively about hope. In their work the co-authors inquire into how spaces of hope can be developed and sustained for teachers practicing in contexts different than their own cultural and/or educational backgrounds. This is one facet of hope literature that directly addresses the teacher experience. In this literature, the notion of hope takes on a self reflective dimension. Nunn (2005) as cited in Li et al. (2008) defines hope:

as a notion characterized by uncertainty, possibility, desirability, and goodness ... which is practiced against an individual’s narrative understanding of their past and of themselves ... individuals may draw upon these narratives, combining and altering their understanding of them in order to come to new understandings of their own identities ... Hope is then understood as a reflective practice which is

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not only forward looking, but also may be backward looking, as hope allows an individual to reflect upon one's experiences and to understand them in new ways.

(p.248)

This work is extremely relevant to the experience of EAL teachers and can be applied to the process of narrative inquiry as I navigate through my own experiences. My own understanding of hope as a means of interpreting my own lived experience within my personal and professional landscape is crucial when writing autobiographically to make new and altered meanings.

Very little research has been done around hope and the experience of EAL teachers, some hope literature has focused on the refugee student experience. One significant piece of literature is the work done by Yohani (2008), with regards to refugee students. Yohani's definition of hope can be reinterpreted for my hope as an EAL educator:

Hopefulness as a subjective element of experience can be key in a child's ability to engage in meaningful activities that in turn contribute to psychosocial development. The implied links between hope, engaging in meaningful activities, and personal growth in Bronfenbrenner's theory suggest that hope may also assist with adjustment processes in the aftermath of or during stressful life experiences

(p. 2).

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Yohani maintains that “ hope is contextualized, often embedded in our personal experiences and life contexts, hope is nurtured in reciprocal relationships, and the dynamics of hope involve action and personal appraisal of actions” (Yohani, 2008, ). Yohani uses these aspects of hope in her work with refugee children from the perspective of providing specific interventions to these students and “by strengthening connections to themselves and to people within their milieu”, (p.3). This work is very relevant to the EAL learners with whom I have worked as a means of understanding their pasts and demonstrates how hope can be used in conjunction with resilience to foster action for teachers working with these students. Although Yohani’s work centers on students, her research is extremely relevant to EAL teachers. By exploring hope as a means from which we can springboard into inquiry, reflection and self-awareness, teachers such as myself can benefit from using hope as a lens.

Another study (Li & Larsen, 2011) used narrative inquiry to explore two Chinese newcomer students’ stories of hope as they navigate through the challenges of the Canadian educational experience. The authors examined “threats to hope” (page 21) such as challenge of living with homestay families and struggles to learn English (p. 21). They also examined “sources of hope” (p.22) which included academic hope and hope within friendships and community. This study is of importance to hope literature and pertinent to the narrative inquiry that I am doing. The study related hope to education in general for adolescents who are EAL learners. This can be applied to the EAL students with whom I have worked. More importantly, this article provided me with a means of looking at hope in the educational context in general. It led me to explore what hope might mean to refugee students and what hope might mean to me as the teacher of these students. From

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Li and Larsen's work, as an EAL teacher, the relevancy of this work became evident as I continue to seek out ways to foster hope in students as well as teachers. In their study, Li and Larsen identify ways in which hope can be fostered for students. The first way that is by fostering an educational environment that meets their needs for English language learning at a pace that is appropriate for the learner. The second way is to foster relationships and community as a means of building hope. Understanding the familial relationships that exist for each of the students is vital to helping the student feel supported. Another element to fostering hope is by examining the powerful relationships that can occur between teacher and student. In this study, one of Li and Larsen's participants describes the importance of personal interactions with some teachers that helped her to feel valued academically and worthy of teachers' support. By examining relationships with our students, we can examine ways that hope can be fostered within our classrooms. Communicating our beliefs in our students is crucial to this process. Friends are also a source of hope to our students. As teachers, it is necessary to reflect on providing students with a means to foster both old and new friendships in the context of the educational setting. Finally, Li & Larsen (2011) also suggest that as teachers we need to reflect on the students' own stories of hope as a means to invite discussion and bring "tacit narratives of hope to more conscious awareness" (p.26).

Sillito's (2009) work about hope and transformation with adult ESL learners and their teachers in Canada is another narrative inquiry. In her study, the author explored the narratives of five ESL learners and two teachers to seek out how these research participants "interpreted their hope" (p. 179). Through this "study about hope, through hope" (p.185), space was created for dialogue, and "layered narratives whose deepest

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meanings were told through the telling and retelling, listening and reflecting on both the content and the process of the narratives” (p.185). Sillito identifies threads that are pertinent to my hope for the future as an EAL teacher. Acknowledging that education is hopeful in the larger teaching landscape for both teacher and student, hope “is inherent in education” (p. 183). The power of language is also regarded as “a vehicle for hope” (p. 183) as I teach, and provide support to teachers. Language “carries a message of hope in a way...you have some control once you get a handle on your communication skills” (p.183). Another important thread is that “teachers should listen” (p.184). Teachers who simply listen to their students can foster hope by attentively listening to identify the needs of the learner This finding can be applied to listening to other teachers as well and providing space for teachers to be heard on personal and professional levels. Finally, Sillito (2009) emphasises that “marks matter”. This speaks to the need to address student placement, programming and planning at a level where student hope is not diminished. Students relate hope to their achievement in EAL classes. Teachers and school systems should be awakened to the impact that they may inadvertently have on students when students are left to integrate into mainstream classes without appropriate supports especially if they have had interruptions to their schooling.

In the following pages, I will begin by looking broadly at who these students are and describing some characteristics that may help to understand them. I then explore the voices of others with respect to their experiences working with EAL and refugee students in order to understand how they have storied their experiences. Finally, I shift to the bigger teaching landscape to explore the experiences of students within the school system and the various needs, challenges and barriers facing them.

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Before I could understand what teachers were saying about their experiences with refugee students, I felt I had to define the population with whom I was working and the various terminologies used to address this specific population of EAL learners. Many different jurisdictions use different names and defining characteristics in order to better understand what teachers were talking about within their own contexts.

My experience has been mainly with students who are refugees and who have needed English Language supports. Most of the students whom I have taught have either experienced significant interruptions to their formal education or who have never been in a formal education setting. These students arrived in Canada through various agencies and brought with them varied life experiences. Each student is unique and the labels that may have been attributed to the individual student or the group of students by our academic institutional systems are only being used to help facilitate the transition for these students into our schools. The terms used to refer to the individual or to the group do not represent the experiences that each has lived individually. It would be imprudent to suggest that all refugees have had interrupted schooling and that contrarily, all students with interrupted schooling are refugees. My purpose in exploring the literature is to further understand how other jurisdictions have made meaning of the terminology used to refer to this group of students within their teaching landscapes.

### **Identifying the Refugee Student**

My research begins by attending to the various definitions, acronyms and characteristics that can be attributed to this group of learners. Current research has moved

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away from categorizing or classifying students who have limited or no prior schooling alongside other EAL learners. This shift recognizes students are adding English to their language experience, and also identifies their needs as very specific in nature. In other words, these students require programming to address the gaps in learning, with the goal of moving the student from precise academic programming in literacy and numeracy to integrated EAL programming. Even within the literature, terms referring to these learners have different uses, assumptions and implications.

From an American educational policy perspective, Crandall, Bernache, and Prager (1998) refer to these students as “under-schooled” who “differ not only in language and culture, but also in educational background, degree of literacy in the first language and oral and written English language proficiency” (p. 721). In two other American studies by DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2007) and Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2001), the term SIFE or SLIFE is used. These terms refers to Students with Interrupted Formal Education or Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. Finally, the term LFS is also given to this population (Alcala, 2000), which means students with Limited Formal Schooling. When comparing the terms for student-first terminology, SIFE/SLIFE places the student first and then explains the educational experience. In Crandall et al. (1998), the term “under-schooled” simply becomes the encompassing label and students are not identified as people first. Instead, the entire “under-schooled” label becomes the pronoun for the group.

In two Canadian documents developed by the Ministries of Education in Manitoba and Ontario, the terminology also differs. Both documents place the students as the priority by referring to them as either English language learners or English as an



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Additional Language learners with specific language needs. In Ontario, the provincial ministry has also written a document for educators with a focus on students with limited prior schooling. In this province, students who have experienced interruptions may have specialized programming that provides additional support in an English literacy development program. These programs:

are for a student whose first language is other than English or is a variety of English significantly different from that used for instruction in Ontario schools. Students in these programs are most often from countries in which their access to education has been limited, and they have had limited opportunities to develop language and literacy skills in any language.(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 7)

In Manitoba, a 2010 draft report of The English as an Additional Language Curriculum Framework refers to these students as:

**Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) learners:** This refers to learners in the Middle and Senior Years who have significantly interrupted, limited, or no school experience and therefore their literacy skills and school-based knowledge are well below an age-appropriate level... learners in the Middle and Senior Years who have significant gaps in their schooling (i.e., these students have experienced three or more years of interrupted or no schooling and their school-based knowledge is well below an age-appropriate level). Literacy, academics, and language (LAL) is the descriptor for these students' specific learning needs. (Manitoba Education, 2010)

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According to this draft, the characteristics attributed to LAL learners can be applied to other groups who are not newcomers to Canada. The definition is broad and does not limit itself to only newcomers. Support for these students is offered in a variety of ways in Manitoba. The type of support ranges from Intensive Newcomer Support Programs funded partially by the provincial government a complete lack of specialized programming and full mainstream integration of students in some settings. Kanu (2008) refers to the African students in her study in Manitoba as “adolescents and youth coming from war-affected and disrupted schooling backgrounds” (p. 917). In this research, Kanu (2008) cites research by Thomas and Collier (1997) that describes these students as “students with low literacy, interrupted schooling, and traumatic experiences” (p. 917).

Because of my personal background as a resource teacher, I am partial to terminology that recognizes these students are people first. This comes from years of working towards acknowledging the child before the diagnosis. Therefore, I prefer to refer to this group as “students with interrupted or limited prior schooling”. I recognize the students are all individuals that come with a variety of experiences. I also recognize that although their education may not have been the same as a Western one, it is still incredibly valuable. The interruptions to their schooling may have occurred in back in their former countries, but their education continued through their own lived experiences in their communities.

### **Teacher Experiences Working with Refugee Students**

As my inquiry began to unfold and take shape, I realized my research needed to shift in direction. I needed to explore the experiences of others who have worked with

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refugee students and have written or participated in research about their experiences. It was with great hope and patience that I looked through copious amounts of peer-reviewed journals, books, and online articles to find almost nothing about teachers' experiences when working with refugees. Stewart (2010) cites in her work, "As Bronfenbrenner (2001) indicated, much of the research thus far has focused on the development of children examined by the influences of the older generation. Little research has focused on the role reversal and the development of the adults as they are influenced by their children...I extended this examination to include the reciprocal relationship between the student and the teacher" (p. 177). Like Stewart, I wanted to hear what teachers had to say. I wanted to learn about their worlds and their stories. But it was not an easy task. Although I found several examples of activities to help with psycho-social needs and deal with trauma, I hit the proverbial wall trying to find academic research regarding teachers' experiences working with refugees.

I began with a critical look at two sources from an American context even though it had minimal application to the Canadian context. The first source was the work of Freeman et al. (2001). In their work, the researchers address the programming needs of students with limited formal schooling from an American bilingual perspective where there is a tendency to have a more homogenous EAL population. This study explores the experience of one bilingual teacher in a multi-age classroom (grades 4-6) who works with EAL students with Limited Formal Schooling in California. The study describes the teacher's use of research-based strategies such as paying special attention to routine, the physical environment of the class, cooperative grouping, providing ample time for reading and writing, designing theme-based units and drawing on L1 to facilitate

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language learning in her class. The study is based on experiences she had as a teacher but does not say how the data was collected. As well, the descriptions of the students and their individual proficiency levels are not given. It appears the study focuses only on the students in her class. Nevertheless, not all the students were the same even though they may have come from the same heritage or cultural group. The research also failed to address how these students were identified as students with Limited Prior Schooling and what methods were used for assessment. Although the authors do a good job of identifying some of the challenges that teachers and students face in these situations, the article was too broad and only contributed strategies for differentiation when discussing the literacy needs of students with LPS.

In another source, Alcala (2000), who works with ESOL teacher preparation as a professor, discusses a general framework for the programming of students with limited prior education in an American context. The author broadly defines what is meant by Limited Formal Schooling as well as factors that may explain some of the reasons why students may have LFS. Some of these factors include a lack of parental involvement and the need for “the child to supplement the family’s income” (p. 2). The author has not explored the notion that familial involvement is culturally influenced and that much of our Western perceptions regarding how families should be involved with schools do not include the diverse attitudes and beliefs of other cultures. As well, the author suggests that students with LFS will need individualized planning and instructional activities/strategies will need to be differentiated. There is no methodology and this article is more of a commentary than research. Added to this, this article is far too simplistic and generalizes about the learning of students with LEP who have limited or

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non-existent schooling experiences. An example of this is when Alcala states that students should simply focus on language that will allow them to be functional and to “provide the LFS student with the training needed to acquire/maintain a job” (p. 4). The author also uses potentially contentious discourse by generalizing attitudes for the LFS student population; he uses the term “alien” several times throughout his paper and pathologizes students’ needs by referring to the “diagnosis of the student’s strengths and weaknesses” (p. 3) when writing individualized language improvement plans. Again, the research was not in a Canadian context, nor directly from a classroom educator’s perspective, and most importantly it did not express the experiences of teachers who have worked with refugee students.

After searching the corpus of literature, I recalled a preliminary report for consultation and discussion that had been produced locally by the Manitoba provincial government. My research had taken me back to the word “hope”, and finally I felt as if I was moving forward and deeper into my inquiry.

To “*build hope*” for these learners and their families it is critical that schools address their needs more effectively by developing specialized programming and interventions. Experiences in Manitoba and in other jurisdictions suggest that intensive integrated ESL, literacy, and academic preparation together with career and socio-emotional supports can be effective. (McKay and Tavares, 2005, p. 3)

In 2005, I was in the midst of my journey with EAL refugee students while experiences were unfolding in an exponential way in my own world and across the province. The province had sought out the perspective of several schools throughout

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Manitoba and developed a framework for discussion around appropriate programming for adolescent and young adult newcomers of war-affected backgrounds. The *Building Hope* report (McKay and Tavares, 2005) was compiled by several government stakeholders as well as several school sources that looked at the backgrounds of learners; the findings of research, promising practices, and innovations and current programming trends in other jurisdictions for refugee learners. The critical part of this study for me was the input of teachers and administrators from several school divisions who had shared their experiences in the report so conditions in the Manitoba setting could improve for EAL and refugees.

The key findings of this study are summarized below (McKay and Tavares, 2005, p.50).

- There is a clear need for improving current programming and supports.
  - Schools in Manitoba have a relatively negative perception of how well they are meeting the needs of their students. The survey indicated that 53.8% of the responding schools rated their current programming supports a “weak” or “somewhat weak”. Another 26% of schools reported current programming supports as “adequate” at best. This suggests that 80.7% of schools feel that significant improvements should be made in terms of the programming supports made available to these students.
- Schools understand and recognize the need for more specialized supports.
  - Four of the most frequently reported challenges were the need for more resources for specialized schools supports (59.6%), the need for more

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intense support (51.9%), the lack of available expertise (50%), and the duration of support needed (50%). These results clearly point to the need for more specialized and intensive programming for the students. The most frequently reported programming supports in need of enhancement were, in order of priority, literacy development, extended and intensified ESL programming, and addressing significant academic gaps. (While students needed to develop the essential numeracy, scientific, and other mandatory knowledge and skills, these gaps were unaddressed due to either the previous lack of access to formal education or significant interruptions to the student's schooling). Schools also reported that students often came from disadvantaged socio-economic situations, with socio-emotional needs being reported as significant by 64.3% of respondents.

- Current programming and educational supports are inappropriate and not well matched with learners' needs.
  - A mismatch exists between the programming supports these learners require and what is actually available. The vast majority of schools reported classroom integration with TA support as being their primary vehicle for delivering support to these learners, followed by classroom integration with resource teacher support and classroom integration without any additional supports. Only 42.9% of the schools reported offering ESL specialist support, 28.6% reported offering socio-emotional and/or cross-cultural counseling, and 26.2% offered career or academic

counseling. While 88.1% of the schools reported literacy as being the most significant challenge, only 14.6% of the schools reported having a literacy teacher or clinician support available. This indicates a significant disparity between the reported needs of these learners and the available programming to meet those needs. Schools also reported relatively low numbers of summer school opportunities, alternative programs, or special before- and after-school programs being offered to this population.

- Schools with both small and large refugee/war-affected students recognize the need for specialized supports.
  - The most significant issues for schools with small populations are the lack of resources for and limited availability of specialized supports. Not surprisingly, 52.5% of these schools reported having a lack of appropriate programming. This may explain why schools with smaller refugee populations reported more behavioral and discipline issues than schools with larger refugee populations. On the other hand, the small population of refugee/war-affected learners in a school made it much more feasible for teachers and schools to “rally” around the learner and attempt to provide more individualized support. Schools with larger refugee populations tend to be more acutely aware of the significant educational needs these students present, but this does not mean these schools believe they are better able to meet those needs. While they are more likely to have some form of ESL programming and/or specialist support, they recognize the limitations of the support provided in comparison to the



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needs of the students. Schools with large refugee populations appear to be overwhelmed by the extensiveness of the support required. A full 72.7% of these schools reported that the duration of support needed was a significant challenge.

All in all, the findings in this report suggest that in 2005 teachers working with newcomers in Manitoba faced many challenges. In my experience, I feel that although teachers strived to do their utmost to make the new educational landscape the very best for these learners in both the academic and social spheres, the barriers outweighed their good intentions. The statistics in the report indicated an evident desire to achieve better programming on many levels. This programming includes intensive and lasting academic and language support, particularly in the area of literacy as well as the development of supports in the socio-emotional domains. Teachers recognize there is a disparity between theory and practice, from what is needed to what is actually occurring in the classrooms on a daily basis. They also acknowledge that systemic supports are limited due to a variety of reasons. These reasons may range from financial challenges to lack of understanding from an educational perspective of the complex needs of these learners. Finally, the report indicates that whether a school receives several or just a few students from refugee situations, the needs of this group of learners far exceeds those of immigrant EAL students who have come to Canada under different circumstances. All the teachers in the report identified the significant educational and emotional supports required for these students as being unique.

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For the frontline classroom teacher, EAL teacher, resource teacher or administrator, the placement of these students in the Manitoba context could result in good intentions filled with much frustration. For the classroom teacher, the frustration of trying to meet the academic needs of a pre-literate high school student in an English class could be devastating for both the teacher and learner. For the EAL teacher, the diversity of teaching multi-level students in multi-level classes can be exhausting with extended days for preparation. For the resource teacher, it can mean trying to build capacity within a school to teach language and academics while dealing with case-management issues. For the administrator, the responsibility to make sure that all learners are receiving the appropriate support or programming within the school can be overwhelming. In conclusion, the findings in the report point to a teaching landscape where daily experiences can be emotionally charged and reach far beyond curriculum goals.

At a conference in Winnipeg in May 2011, I had the opportunity to listen to Dr. Jan Stewart speak to educators, students and others interested in the experiences of refugee students at the Education in Diversity Conference. It was at this conference that Dr. Stewart released her new book entitled *Supporting Refugee Children: Strategies for Educators* (2010). Dr. Stewart dedicates an entire section to the experiences of teachers working with refugee students. She relays teacher experiences through the lens of a bio-ecological model that looks at the development that occurs through the interactions between multiple settings and from the relations between these settings Stewart's research offers several important findings in this part of her research. First, the teachers "indicated that their lives have changed dramatically since they started working with refugee students" (p. 178). The students have provided teachers with a renewed purpose

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for their work and a wider perspective of “marginalized people in the world” (p. 178). One participant even described her experiences with her students as inspiring her to become “a better human being” (p. 179). Teachers also reported they learned or enhanced several characteristics as a result of working with refugee students, “empathy, humility, compassion, courage, faith in the human spirit, patience, commitment, and responsibility” (p. 180). One administrator expressed the difficulties for teachers who invest or “go the extra mile” for students” (p. 181). He expressed his concern for teachers not being able to take care of themselves while dealing with the many challenges of refugee students, as working with these students “brings individuals closer to the harrowing atrocities of violence and terrorism in the contemporary world” (p. 182). Stewart writes that the challenge for all ecological systems is to “collectively respond to the needs of the people in it”. This requires “the collaborative and creative efforts of everyone” (p. 185).

Having only encountered limited research with regards to the experiences of teachers working with refugee students, I felt I needed to delve deeper into the experiences of refugee students and look at the research from their perspective to gain a deeper understanding of the issues. I felt that much of the current work is based on the notion that students who arrive in our schools come with varying experiences, and along with human capacity and hope, resilience represents the core characteristics of the individual that “mediate the effects of the various challenges” (Stewart, 2010, p. 126). Resiliency and the protective factors that foster resilience such as being connected to school and community, feeling good about yourself, and having access to places in the community for support (Stewart, 2010), are all critical parts of the literature with regards

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to refugee students. Therefore I had to further explore resiliency and how it impacts learners within the context of my research.

### **Resiliency as an underlying narrative in the life of the refugee student**

Stewart (2010) develops a model that represents the major adjustment challenges for refugee children who come to Canada. She identifies educational, environmental, economic and psycho-social challenges. However, although these students are faced with many barriers that they must overcome, many are able to attend school, work, live independently or with family members, stay hopeful that their current situation will improve, and exhibit resilience despite their situations. In my exploration of the literature with regards to refugee students, I examined the different concepts to better inform myself with current research. Below, I explore resiliency as much of the literature pertaining to refugees makes mention of this underlying characteristic.

The literature that refers to students with Limited Prior Schooling is laden with examples of the students' ability to overcome the challenges they have faced. Resiliency is a thread found throughout much of the literature with regards to several aspects of the students' lives. These aspects include personal resilience, educational resilience and the impact of resiliency on families. Whether these challenges are related to the personal traumas they experienced in the past or are the current challenges that newcomers face when they arrive in a new country, students must have resiliency as a "universal capacity" (Benard, 2004) in order to make lives for themselves in their new surroundings. These protective factors such as being connected to school and community, feeling good

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about yourself, and having access to places in the community for support (Stewart, 2010) appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geography and historical boundaries (Werner and Smith as cited in Benard, 2004). Although individuals may have these protective factors, they may not be resilient and may or may not be able to handle all situations (Stewart, 2010, p. 239); “Resilience is built up over time through experiencing different situations” (Stewart, 2010, p. 239). Prior to considering the existing literature without first understanding the fundamental concept of resiliency is warranted.

Resiliency can be looked at from many perspectives such as a personal characteristic, educational resilience, or resiliency through the sense of a coherence framework. It is from these perspectives that I begin to explore how resilience may impact the lives of those students with whom I have worked.

### **Personal characteristics as part of resiliency.**

The first lens looks at resilience through a personal characteristic. Resilient students such as those who have come from war-affected areas can be seen as having personal strengths in four categories (Benard, 2004). Benard’s research focused on a synthesis of over a decade of work on resiliency. With a critical look at the resiliency theory, she explored resiliency as a universal capacity through personal strengths. She also compiled evidence supporting environmental protective factors, family protective factors, school protective factors, and community protective factors.

Based on the studies of others, Benard (2004) suggests that humans have four characteristics of personal strengths that can be attributes of resilient people. These four categories - social competence, autonomy, problem solving and sense of purpose - have

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been explored in much of the literature about resiliency and transcend ethnicity, geography, gender, culture and time

Within the area of social competence, the research indicates:

...for youth of non-dominant cultures, the ability to move back and forth and between their primary culture and the dominant culture or to accommodate the dominant culture without assimilating into it, means learning the “codes of power” while retaining their cultural and self identities. This ability has been consistently identified with school success and positive youth development outcomes. (Delpit, 1995; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Gibson, 1997a, 1997b; Luthar and McMahon, 1996; Mehan et al., 1994 as cited by Benard, 2004, p. 15)

With regards to autonomy, Benard (2004) maintains that recent studies have found “a strong positive ethnic identity is associated with high self-esteem, a strong-commitment to doing well in school, a strong sense of purpose in life, great confidence in one’s own efficacy, and high academic achievement” (p. 21). This autonomy, which is part of the entire resilient student, is greatly affected by the loss of identity that many newcomers experience with their many traumatic losses of culture, language, religion, family and even personal memories. Such losses can have a great impact on their schooling experiences. Many of the refugee students must navigate through several stages of acculturation and the emotional experiences that are attached to those stages. Some students may be entering schools with a tremendous loss of identity as they have been displaced repeatedly in the refugee experience. Once they arrive in Canada, they may experience a loss of language and culture as they navigate their new lives. This may be

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more difficult for some than others. The ones who can get through these transitions and survive these stages are believed to have the “transformative, reframing power to be the essence of resilience” (Benard, 2004, p. 27)

Humans who are resilient have the ability to plan, be flexible through resourcefulness, think critically and have insight. These are considered attributes of problem-solving skills in resilience research (Benard, 2004, p. 17).

Finally, the category of sense of purpose holds interrelated strengths that are assets “based on an orientation toward a compelling and bright future” (Benard, 2004, p. 28). Having a sense of purpose includes having a goal direction, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, special interests, creativity, imagination, optimism, hope, faith, spirituality and a sense of meaning (Benard, 2004, p.14).

These four categories provided me with the framework for understanding resiliency in my students from a broader perspective. However, I needed to become more knowledgeable about resiliency in education to deepen my understanding from the perspective of schooling.

From the research, I was able to narrow the definition of resilience from the broad perspective of human resilience to educational resilience. This term has been heard for years throughout Canadian education philosophy. Fundamentally, if students are educationally resilient, they have the ability to adapt well to their educational settings and succeed in the Canadian classroom.

**Educational resilience.**

“Educational resilience” is a perspective that is discussed in regards to refugee students. According to Wang, Haertel, and Walberg’s (1996) study conducted on behalf of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement for the U.S. Department of Education, they sought to “provide an overview of the research being done on fostering educational resilience among children whose circumstances place them at risk of educational failure; and to describe educational practices that are resilience promoting and their implications for student development and learning success” (p. 1). This study focused on inner-city students and took a specific look at classroom practices, home and community, curriculum design and delivery, school-wide practices and policies, including state and district policies. The study laid out characteristics of educationally resilient students that suggested students who “had higher self-concepts and educational aspirations, felt more internally controlled, interacted more with parents and had parents who encourage them to do their best...resilient students in the study generally perceived their school and classroom environments to be conducive to learning and deemed the standards established by teachers and parents for their academic performance and conduct as appropriate” (p. 6). Most importantly, I found this research was particularly useful in its approach to implementing an inclusive approach when responding to student diversity. I believe this research applies directly to the challenges faced by many refugees who have a great need to receive appropriate programming in order to feel successful in the school environment.



**Family and resilience.**

*Deep family and personal hopes are catalysts for a new life.* (Personal communication: Dr. Yi Li, March 14, 2010)

Resilient families who can adapt well to their new environment stand a greater chance of succeeding in this new environment as they see family life as comprehensible, meaningful and manageable (Atwell, Gifford, and McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009, p. 681). Educational resilience around the Sense of Coherence framework compliments the research done with regards to the ability to predict stability in the future aspirations of parents for their children after they have experienced displacement or trauma once they have resettled. Atwell et al. (2009) explore the complexities of being a parent or guardian amidst the difficult experiences of resettlement in Australia. Over three months, multiple interviews with purposeful sampling revealed, “a complex network of factors which influence how well refugee parents are able to envisage their families’ futures, and which determine their capacity to support their children in achieving their ambitions” (p. 678). Some of these factors include understanding a new environment, negotiating differences in parenting styles and maintaining cultural traditions. This study is beneficial because it explores the challenges and dissonances that may occur within families through the lens of the parent. This area of research has been studied in regards to general SLA research, but it is particularly beneficial to research about students with Limited Prior Schooling. The study reinforces the need to provide appropriate resettlement programs which aligns with much of the work currently being done in Manitoba.

## **Identifying More Needs**

With resiliency being of relevance to many refugee students in Manitoba, I felt there was a greater need to explore the literature more deeply in regards to the school environment. There is no denying that many of our students fit the description of resilient humans; however, I wanted to know what the research said about the actual programming that should be implemented for students who have experienced interruptions to their learning or had limited schooling. I also wanted to explore the social and emotional factors impacting students who have experienced trauma. Finally, I felt that although the education system has made great strides in how to deal with refugees coming to our schools, there had to be more literature available describing what teachers actually need to best teach these students.

The current literature about students with interrupted schooling focuses on three main threads. The first is the challenges encountered by teachers and students within academic programming as well as an emphasis on the need for well-trained and committed teachers (DeCapua et al., 2007, p. 44). Second, much support is needed from a psycho-social perspective when working with many of these students. Finally, parents and family are crucial to the relationship between home and school when these students arrive.

### **Academic needs of students.**

As I reflected on the process of finding appropriate scholarly articles to assist in my research, I came to the conclusion that the Canadian context, and specifically Manitoba, is a setting that lacks a great deal of research regarding students with limited

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prior schooling. Much of the literature is limited to the American context and many of the studies have a homogenous population slant with a focus on the Hispanic population. Chamot's (2000) research is based on a homogenous group, and although the process by which the project was initiated and followed through would be useful in the Manitoban context as an instructional method, the bilingual context for many of the students I have taught would not be applicable. Chamot's (2000) report examines the instructional study called Project Accelerated Learning (PAL) for students who enter American schools with limited prior education. It was an ongoing study that looked at 80 adolescent immigrants from either a monolingual or bilingual education setting. The study lasted three years and spanned over four school districts. Its methodology included interviews, standardized assessment scores and tools that were developed by the researcher for the purpose of the study. Teachers were prepared in cohorts with regards to curricula, strategies and instructional pedagogy. Chamot's report did not present the findings of the actual study but rather gave an overview of PAL which included the context, participants, instruments and procedures. It also described the professional development offered to the cohort as well as the scope and sequence of the study. What was significant for my research was the description of "literacy characteristics" that Chamot provided. The discussion serves as guidelines that can be applied to many students in similar situations. Chamot did do an excellent job of describing the wide range of literacy levels that can exist in a particular class. Chamot explores the great need for appropriate programming within the American school system as there is considerable variability and a lack of grade-appropriate schooling, especially for older students. This work supports the need for intensive literacy

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instruction for these students which pertains directly to the Manitoban context as the need for literacy, academics and language programs grows.

As Crandall et al. (1998) state, there are consequences when there is a failure to develop programming and policy for under-schooled immigrant students. Their research supports the need for distinctive programming in regards to students who have experienced gaps in their learning. Based on 1998 statistics in the United States, the research specifically focuses on the population of students arriving in American schools without prior education or students who have been under-schooled due to many factors, including interruptions due to war or extended visits back to the student's homeland. Crandall et al. (1998) discuss the "double challenge" (p. 719) of learning English and acquiring literacy while "catching a moving target" as the student must make up for years of lost schooling. They find that the current educational and policy contexts are in need of drastic changes. For example, one area that is in need of improvement is the professional development of teachers working with under-schooled students who rarely share the same linguistic and cultural background. The authors also provide alternatives for educational programs and policies such as coherent, articulated instructional programs and additional time allotment for the acquisition of language and literacy in schools. Finally, Crandall et al. (1998) suggest that the lack of policy in regards to the education of under-schooled students will result in consequences for learners, teachers and the system. Although this is an older article written in an American setting, it remains relevant to educational policy regarding students with these particular programming needs. The research recognizes that although the number of students is low, the needs are still great. At the time this was written, this was accurate for the American setting and it

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is now true for the suburban setting in which I work. This work also supports the research done later by Kanu (2008) that explores the needs and barriers facing African students. Educational policy is an area that has been almost ignored with this group of EAL learners, but Crandall et al. (1998) address pressing issues such as appropriate education for this student population. A poignant statement made in Crandall et al.'s article draws on the work of Lyons (1992): "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum: For students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education", (Crandall et al., 1998, p. 727).

Added to the several barriers and challenges that Kanu (2008) discusses is "contributing to the problem is the lack of a substantial body of research or accumulated knowledge that likely would accrue from a policy that mandates special services to these students" (p. 728). In an effort to contribute to this discussion, I will look at this group of learners through a discussion of their characteristics, needs, and current programming and policy that is addressed in the literature.

This led me back to the work of Kanu (2008) who focused her research within Manitoba and wrote her research about African refugees and the educational barriers they faced. The research participants were students, parents and teachers from two urban high schools in Manitoba. Through the use of focus groups, interviews and observation, the author examined the Manitoban school context and the educational needs and barriers facing African students within these two high schools during a year-long study. Kanu (2008) identified educational needs to include areas such as academic, social and economic needs, and based her theoretical framework on Bronffebrenner's (2005) bio-

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ecological theory of human development and Rutter's (1999) work on resilience. Kanu's (2008) findings include academic challenges such as "lack of academic support at home" (p. 923); economic challenges such as the lack of economic resources available to refugees; and psycho-social challenges such as "difficulties of moving on from traumatic experiences" (p. 931). She also describes the implications on a macro and micro level as educators are encouraged to gain a better understanding of the larger context of the refugee student. These findings are extremely relevant to research being done in Manitoba. It is a seminal piece of research regarding the refugee population in urban schools and brought forth many issues that were not being addressed in the education system. These issues include:

Lack of academic support at home, separation from family, cultural dissonance including academic culture dissonance, acculturation stress and/or difficulty with academic skills, limited English language proficiency, academic gaps due to disrupted schooling, fast-paced curriculum, fear and distrust of authority figures like teachers, fear of speaking out in class and grade placement based on age and English assessment tests rather than academic ability. (Kanu, 2008, p. 924)

Kanu's (2008) research also described challenges such as "the lack of economic resources available to refugee students" (p. 929) and the psycho-social challenges present among refugee students and families. By hearing the students' and familial perspectives, it gave much credibility to the challenges being faced by both students and teachers alike.

**The need for professional development.**

Another common thread in the literature pertaining to students with interrupted schooling is the need to have well-trained and committed teachers for this group. Although these students are still considered EAL learners, their general academic needs and psycho-social needs are often vastly different than the student who is paying to learn English through an International Student Program or the EAL student whose parents chose to move to Canada to pursue a professional career through the Provincial Nominee Program.

Currently in Manitoba, with the anticipation of a new curriculum framework for EAL learners, professionals have the opportunity to increase their knowledge in the area of professional development. As DeCapua et al. (2007) point out, “[t]he most important factor in establishing a successful program is having teachers who care deeply about this segment of the student population...team members need to be familiar with the resources available both in and out of school” (p. 44). The creation of this document was a direct response to the increasing need to provide teachers with more theory, knowledge and strategies that could be used in a cross-curricular fashion. As well, several school divisions have begun the process of creating professional development sessions and professional learning communities in the area of EAL.

Supporting this need for more professional development in EAL is the special area group for EAL in Manitoba. There has been a marked increase in membership in the Teachers of English as an Additional Language (TEAL) and the Manitoba Special Area Group, and schools are seeking the assistance of the province with respect to professional

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development. However, the general EAL professional development opportunities are extremely different from those required for students with interruptions to their schooling. For example, teachers need to become comfortable with teaching emergent literacy strategies to high school-aged students. This issue in Manitoba is twofold as currently pre-service teachers are required to take minimal courses in EAL training before they begin their teaching journey. In the current Bachelor of Education program at the University of Manitoba, early years teachers take one credit hour out of sixty focusing on EAL. This is a requirement for their program. Also, the Ministry of Education in Manitoba now requires all pre-service teachers to take a course in diversity. Pre-service teachers can opt out of this for a Teacher of English as an Additional Language course. The possibilities are few for teachers with regards to required learning in EAL. Secondly, even if they have chosen to take a course in EAL methodology (which is a great springboard for further professional development), the teaching strategies for this segment of the population require a precise look at specific literacy and numeracy strategies added to make the learning meaningful and relevant. Teachers need to remember that “although these learners may be at pre-literate or emergent literacy stages of language learning, they are often mature, motivated, and resilient learners who bring with them a variety of life experiences” (Manitoba Education, 2010).

Teachers and school teams also require professional development for working as collaborative school-based teams. This model of service delivery requires teachers to understand and develop leadership in the areas of advocacy and building capacity as a whole school in order to address the needs for these students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). There is a need for system-wide professional learning plans for all



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stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, educational assistants, school staff, volunteers and community partners. This would ensure all were aware of their responsibility to support this small group of students who have the potential to succeed once they have closed significant learning gaps (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

### **The psycho-social needs of refugee students.**

Another thread found throughout the literature in regards to students who have experienced interruptions to their learning is the need to pay particular attention to their social and emotional needs. As DeCapua et al. (2007) state, “ Students with interrupted formal education bring with them not only lost education time, but also a host of social and psychological problems that are usually the result of having been abruptly uprooted from familiar surroundings and transplanted into an alien environment” (p. 45). This common thread is evident in the research done by Mays (2007) who provides an overview of the challenges war-affected children face when they move to another country. He describes the current global situation with regards to refugee immigrants and cites statistics from Canada and the United Kingdom. Specifically, Mays provides statistics about the number of refugees currently entering Canada who have experienced being displaced and have been traumatized by war. His purpose is to examine the effects of conflict on children and to “suggest how to proceed with their education now that they have arrived in Canada” (Mays, 2007, p. 10). Mays describes some of the stresses, such as arriving in the host country without the family unit and experiencing atrocities such as

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starvation and sexual exploitation, as some of the factors that make the move to Canada a more challenging situation. He also characterizes the variety of symptoms these students may experience such as anxiety, panic and social isolation once they are in their new setting. Mays does an excellent job of reinforcing the fact that each case is unique and the children should be assessed individually as no two circumstances are ever alike. Mays also reinforces the research done by several other persons in addressing the need for more teacher education that is specific to this EAL population. Although the article is only a brief overview of some of the new challenges these students face in a new country, Mays is precise in his delivery and lends much support to the growing issue of supporting war-affected refugees in Canada.

Kanu (2008) also discusses the psycho-social challenges that some students may face, especially if they have experienced interruptions to their schooling due to war or other trauma. Kanu points out that “the psychosocial well-being of refugees includes their overcoming of traumatic experiences, acquiring a sense of safety and a sense of self, and adjusting to the expectations of the new culture while being able to retain cherished values of the homeland” (p. 931). Kanu suggests that neither refugees nor their families have received treatment or been provided with programs and services to deal with these traumas (p. 932).

Stewart (2010) has also written a seminal piece of literature in her book, *Supporting Refugee Students: Strategies for Educators* that addresses the theory, research and praxis for educators working with students affected by war. Her study was based on the stories from students now in Manitoba who have been subject to the atrocities of war. The book “examines the personal, social and academic needs” (p. 10) of secondary

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student through challenges and obstacles that they encounter while living in Canada. The content for her book is taken from qualitative work conducted in Winnipeg in 2007 and a similar study she conducted in Uganda in 2008. Stewart focuses on two sections which build on theory and research with recommendations for practice (p. 11). Theoretically Stewart grounds her work in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1999) and segmented assimilation by Portes and Zhou (1993).

Like Kanu (2008), Stewart (2010) uses Bronfenbrenner's work in developmental psychology to explore an ecological model for human development. Within this model, "the individual and the environment are in a reciprocal relationship whereby the person is both influenced by the environment and also influences that environment" (p. 17). Bronfenbrenner's model conceptualizes the ecological environment "as a set of nested systems ranging from the 'micro' to the 'macro'" (Bronfenbrenner, 1999 as cited in Stewart, 2010, p. 17). Stewart uses these systems as a means of examining refugee youths and their process of adjustment to their new environment in Canada (p. 17). Like many refugees, the students interviewed for her research brought with them many psycho-social issues that had a great impact on the classroom teacher and the education of the students. Some of the issues that emerged from Stewart's work include pre-migration trauma that resulted in suffering, loss and pain (2010, p. 29). As well, students expressed the difficulty they had sharing their experiences and the acknowledgement that many factors might affect "recollections of events" (p. 32). Stewart navigates through the lived experiences of students who felt displaced and had feelings of distrust and danger during their trans-migration experiences in the refugee camps as they waited for relocation.

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Stewart also explores the challenges the students faced mentally. From the teacher's perspective, Stewart (2010) suggests "it would not be sufficient to assume that just because students do not seek assistance; they are not struggling with issues" (p.102). Stewart suggests that for educators there are two major issues when dealing with the mental health of students who have experienced trauma. The first is that "people are not trained to know what to look for in children, and secondly, when students do disclose personal information it is often to people who feel that they do not have the knowledge or the skills needed to respond appropriately" (p. 103).

To summarize, the psycho-social needs and challenges for war-affected children living in Canada appear to be difficult to identify, understand, and even more troubling to address. Evidence suggests that there are teachers and other school staff members who do not have the necessary skills to identify a student who is in need of help. Evidence also suggests that there are some people who choose not to acknowledge signs of distress visible in the students, nor do they respond in the most culturally sensitive or appropriate ways to students who have mental health issues. (Stewart, 2010, p. 108)

From the child soldier to the Dominican girl kept at home because of a lack of money to pay for schooling, there is a diverse population of EAL learners coming to Manitoba. With this diversity comes a range of experiences and stories that teachers encounter on a daily basis; and it is important that teachers are mindful that, "two children who have experienced identical traumas may have two completely different outcomes with regards to their reactions" (Rutter, 1999 as cited by Mays, 2007 p. 11).

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This quote illustrates the difficulty encountered in schools and the challenge to provide the best programming possible for these learners while keeping their social and emotional needs in the forefront of their education.

### **Familial involvement in schools.**

Through the literature, I also am aware that a very crucial part of working with these students has not been addressed sufficiently in the research. Much more is needed with respect to making meaningful connections between the home and the school. A great deal of information is missing on how schools and/or teachers can encourage families to become part of the school, which in essence is the heart of the community. A great deal is lacking in this area of literature from the perspective of the parent. Although Atwell et al. (2009) mention some parental feedback with respect to the hopes for the successful futures of their children; there is still a need for more research in this area, particularly with a focus on refugees with interruptions to their schooling.

Kanu (2008) also addresses the familial/school connection. In her study, parents “expressed high aspirations for the academic success of their children in their new country. However, parents cited several personal factors negatively affecting their students’ academic success: preoccupation with economic survival... slower pace of acculturation ...and cultural differences in expectations of parental involvement in their children’s schooling” (p. 928). Her study revealed a great dissonance between the expectations of schools and parents with respect to involvement. According to Kanu

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(2008), this may be due to the differences in culture and the differing views on authority in education.

Further exploration is warranted in regards to the awareness of differences in parenting, western beliefs about familial involvement in schools, and more ways to connect families to their community schools as centres of support rather than institutions of the system within which they are now living.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Refugee children must cope with numerous challenges and barriers when they come to Canada, as many students and families have arrived with resiliency and the hope of a better, safer and more promising future; “For many, this adjustment is, at times, an overwhelming experience coupled with regret and uncertainty” (Stewart, 2010, p. 125). Within these experiences, students are faced with academic challenges and psycho-social needs. In turn, schools are faced with the task of providing appropriate programming and dealing with trauma without being professionally prepared to deal with these difficulties. The literature indicates the challenges and barriers for refugee students in a Canadian school setting are numerous. With psycho-social issues such as past trauma, loss and grief, academic challenges such as limited or non-existent prior schooling and the lack of professional teacher education in this area, both teachers and students can feel defeated.

The literature on teacher experiences working with refugee students is far from plentiful. There is a clear need to hear the voices of educators in school contexts to share the stories and experiences of others so no one feels they are working in isolation.

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Whether they are in urban or suburban schools in Manitoba or across Canada, the gap in research documenting teacher's perspectives is evident. The existing literature demonstrates how ill-equipped teachers really are and that good intentions are simply not enough systemic change is needed. Through teacher stories about their experiences we can unravel the complexities of working with refugee EAL learners, and begin to identify a broader range of solutions.

### **Arriving at the Research Puzzle**

I remember the day that my Graduate Studies advisor, Dr. Yi Li suggested I carry a notebook to write in everyday. It was one of our first meetings. I remember feeling nervous about what I was getting into. After all, did I really need to go to school again? Who was I doing this for? Did I really have the right to take more time away from my family? Did I think I could return to a world that was so out of my element? I was scared and filled with self-doubt. But the narrative of my former students was already working on me and I was already beginning to accept the invitation to explore the questions that were starting to percolate in my head.

I know that working with EAL learners who come from backgrounds with interrupted learning is unique and rewarding. However, in research, there appears to be a gap in this area. Much of the research done refers to EAL learners who have schooling in another language. I have spent a great deal of time as a team member working on the *English as an Additional Language Curriculum Framework* (Manitoba Education, 2010 draft). I am also working on the Literacy, Academics and Language Course

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Development team for the province. In both of these areas, I have noticed the lack of information pertaining to students with Limited Prior Learning and/or significant interruptions to their learning such as the ones in my LAL Centre. Thus there seems to be a need for further research in second language acquisition (SLA) with this group.

I think back to the long and complex career I have had and realize it has been a combination of experiences lived alongside the lives of my students that have shaped who I am and what I am doing today. I know that if it were not for the experiences that I had working as a resource teacher in a middle school several years ago, I would not be doing my current work as a curriculum support teacher for English as Additional Language students. I am also aware there was a pivotal point in my career that changed my life forever. It was the point where I realized I knew nothing about working with EAL learners. I had the choice; I could either leave being a resource teacher and distance myself from EAL or stay in that area and further my own development. Staying meant I would have to change my professional landscape and I had much learning to do. It was the realization that the lives of the students in my memory were now a part of mine and I felt compelled to learn more. As I think back to the courage it took the three students to speak to the school about such a terrifying time, I realize when I had asked them to write their experiences, it was part of a process that needed to occur so they could inform me and others about their resiliency. I realize it is necessary to give students the opportunity to share their stories when they are ready, to give value to their voice and nurture the resilience they have already brought with them during their move to Canada. Now, with the shifting narrative focused on me, it is time to share my lived stories, reconstruction of



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memories and journals with others so I can learn and others may have the opportunity to be part of a shared experience in teaching.

Because of my own personal and professional experiences, I became very interested in my own reflection of how to become a better support for these students. Therefore I was awakened to the possibility of pursuing a narrative inquiry into my own experience as an EAL teacher through memory reconstructions of stories lived alongside my students. Neumann's (1997) article, reminds me of the need to attend to the silence within the stories. Although I do not see the students directly anymore in the classroom setting, I still have many reconstructions of memories that, reconstructed, allow me to attend to the silent and the spoken within each of their stories. Being awakened to the silence and spoken words within each of the stories that I collected over the years as a teacher in a suburban school division in a large city in Manitoba, I reflected on the need to further explore the memories of these stories I had lived with for many years. As I reflected backwards into past experiences, I found common threads shared across the stories and throughout the varied experiences of EAL learners in my classes. The common threads of experience that resounded in my discussions, observations, thoughts and memories were focused on the academic and social needs of the refugee population. These commonalities were shared as students shared their experiences of trauma, schooling, losses, and successes before and after coming to school in Manitoba.

From these shared experiences emerged my central research puzzle: How can I better support refugee students for success in high school? More specifically, what were the challenges and successes I encountered as a teacher working within a social landscape

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that is unfamiliar to refugee newcomers in Manitoba who may have experienced interruptions to their schooling?

The reality of what is happening within the school landscape for students is a mismatch with what is believed to be necessary to provide them with the best supports to succeed in Canadian schools. I recognize that as a province, that environment is changing and working with refugee students is no longer seen as a simple “once in a while” situation. The number of provincial refugees is growing and the group of Kosovar students I worked with years ago was just the beginning of a new focus for immigration since the last major influx of refugees in the late 1970s. The provincial government publicized its desire to increase immigration and part of its strategy was to accept groups of refugees from war-affected nations. And with the recent immigration thrust in Manitoba, the refugee population is getting the attention of many stakeholders, including the education and justice systems. However, the school system is still have much work to do in order to receive, educate, and support these students. The research I am doing will contribute to the new Manitoba landscape that is slowly changing its perspective on immigration and education.

Therefore, in sharing my own experiences and stories through a self-study grounded in narrative inquiry, I can inquire into how these experiences have shaped my own development as a teacher. From these stories, I can glean what experiences had the greatest impact on me in the past, how they shaped what I am currently doing, and how they may resonate in the future as I move in a new direction. More broadly, by sharing my own experiences I feel that other teachers, administrators, policymakers and academics will gain a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a teacher working with

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refugee students in a Manitoba high school. They will be able to see the complexities of teaching EAL students who have experienced interruptions to their schooling. By sharing my lived experiences, others will see this job moves beyond curricular expectations as there are many social, emotional and systemic pieces to the puzzle of teaching refugee students.

Chapter Three: Pathways through Shadowy Space<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Viñales Region, Cuba, February, 2010

### **Narrative Inquiry as the Research Methodology**

*If we can learn how people put their narratives together when they tell stories from life, considering as well how they might have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal. (Bruner, 2004, p. 709)*

*I commend to you the power of dreams and of all the odd, seemingly unrelated moments in the day that produce that “Aha” moments when you least expect them-moments that enrich research writing. Mine come during the night and early in the morning just before arising. Keep a pad and a pencil ready. (Ely, 2007, p. 594)*

*Jean remembers...being confused and uncertain, yet she needed to address what her inquiry was about as she composed her research text. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 125)*

*Another week has flown by and I find myself still amidst a whirlwind of activity with the busy schedule of my family and the continuing story of my job which is unfolding more rapidly than I ever expected. I am more relaxed as my routine has returned after the TEAL conference and since I am a “creature of habit”, I look forward to the times when I know I have “my time” to read and attend to my reflections. I am drawn back to our last meeting at the university and reminded of my frustration and hesitation to enter a dialogue with myself over my own research puzzles. I think of how foolish and vulnerable I felt as I drove home with tear-filled eyes, making promises to myself that I would get through this process and allow myself the space to let the process and narrative work on me. I am reminded of the parting words from Jennifer a doctoral student in one of my*

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*narrative inquiry groups, who assured me I was about “three puzzle pieces away from all the pieces fitting together”. I felt like my new inquirer’s lens was so familiar to Jen and Yi Li and it would never be something to which my decisive personality could adjust. I felt defeated by the method.*

*But it is amazing what a little sleep can do. Shortly after my angst-filled meeting, I awoke in the middle of the night and found myself scribbling crazily onto a piece of scrap paper that I found by my bedside. Somewhere, in a state of half-sleep and half-lucidity, I managed to make my way to my daughter’s room, find an old scribbler and rip out a few pages. It is on these pages that I started to begin to sort out what I feel are my research puzzles at this point in my inquiry. I finally begin to move forward again on my works in progress and feel I can now return to some thinking around the methodology.*

*The chapter by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) was extremely timely for me this week as I juggled the experiences of negotiating a method that is new to me with such things as my tendency to be a decisive personality and seek out finality, my expectation of defining clear qualities and the expectation of solutions .Yet it was like Clandinin and Connelly were in my head and they were anticipating every question I had. At times, I felt like I was the teenage child and they were my parents and they had the answers I needed to move forward with my problem at the time.*

*I found myself quickly scanning ahead to see how they were going to address the issues of theory and interpretations. It did not surprise me there was so much still to learn. I must become familiar with other methods so I can better prepare to justify why this is the method I gravitated towards so naturally. I do feel anxious about doing justice*

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*to the method as a new inquirer but I am sure Clandinin and Connelly would say this is perfectly normal. Talking with Marilyn Huber this week seemed to help me with these thoughts of inadequacy as an inquirer. She said, "Jean Clandinin, the expert in narrative inquiry, writes like the rest of us" Her comment helps me to reaffirm that we are all on this journey and we just keep entering it at different points and it is okay if "nothing ever gets wrapped up" (Conversation with Marilyn Huber, 2010). (Journal Entry for Methodology February 11, 2010)*

## What is Narrative Inquiry

To inquire into my experience as a teacher of English as an Additional Language in Manitoba and the challenges and successes I have encountered while working with students who have had interruptions in their schooling due to war or trauma, I use narrative inquiry as my research methodology. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006),

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally

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meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Simply stated, narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry as a methodology allows me to attend to my own growth by thinking about my own experiences in the past as stories lived and told. The stories that I have lived alongside my students have shaped who I am today. By telling these stories and inquiring into them in this autobiographical narrative inquiry, I have gained a deeper understanding of my experiences working with refugee EAL learners, particularly those who have experienced interruptions to their learning.

Narrative inquiry as a method of study comes from the strong influence of John Dewey's view of experience in education. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Dewey "transforms a commonplace term, experience, in our educators' language, into an inquiry term, and gives us a term that permits better understandings of educational life". For Dewey, "experience is both personal and social" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Experience is also situated as it has continuity and interaction. Life is experience and experience is life. We are all shaped by stories lived and told. These events have a continuous perspective because stories carry on, are interpreted, told and retold.



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Experience requires us to have interactions that contribute to our own stories and the stories of others. Like a ball of yarn, it may have one starting point but the ball gets layered and re-layered and eventually it will be knit into something else.

I was drawn back to the work done by Morris (2002). Morris invites us to think of “narrative” as a method with “new features” (p. 202) that can be used to unpack the stories of humans. He discusses sample size in research by making the comparison of narrative in medicine and how the relationship today between medicine and narrative is growing. He cites the therapeutic advantages of using narrative in such studies. I wondered about the lives of my former students that have been packed, unpacked and repacked. They too cannot be separated into neat categories that are referred to in Morris’ article. All too often, some teachers are reminded of the factors that contribute to the whole child by categorizing and placing labels on students and experiences. Rather than putting their experiences into boxes (Morris, 2002) labeled physical and mental pain, the boundaries become enmeshed and mixed with no clear distinction. I was no longer able refer to the narrative of my experiences with the students simplistically with categorizing stories that happened before, during or after school, those that occurred in early, middle or senior years, and those that happened in Africa or South America. These categories are far too simplistic and would only provide superficial labels when looking at the students’ experiences. I now see the narrative as a fluid substance weaving interchangeably between past, present, and future.

### **The Three Dimensions of Narrative Inquiry: Place, Sociality and Temporality**

Narrative inquiry is a unique methodology that shares many qualities with other forms of qualitative research. However, its uniqueness is drawn from the exploration of three commonplaces: temporality, sociality and place. These three commonplaces “develop a conceptualization of narrative inquiry as a process within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2010, p. 60).

Much of this methodology is situated on Dewey’s way of thinking; “Dewey’s theory of experience, specifically with his notions of situation, continuity and interaction” provides a framework for thinking of experience “beyond the black box that is, beyond the notion of experience being irreducible so that one cannot peer into it” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50). From this work, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have formulated their own conceptualization of narrative inquiry as a three-dimensional space. This space places experiences alongside temporality, sociality and place (p. 50) that requires the inquirer to keep all three commonplaces in mind when using the method. There is a need to focus on personal and social interactions in the continuous space. This is a conscious reflection of the past, present and future. These three dimensions within the narrative help the inquirer navigate through the stories lived and told.

The first dimension of place refers to what is the specific and concrete. It encompasses physical and topographical boundaries and acknowledges that all events take place somewhere. When describing the dimension of place, one must consider the specific descriptors within which the narrative inquiry will take place. For example, a narrative inquirer may look at a landscape from the dimension of place. Where did the

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experience unfold? Was it in a building or outdoors? What did the locale look, smell and feel like? What are my landscapes as a storyteller and as an inquirer? What is my personal and current educational landscape from which I will write my experiences?

The dimension of sociality takes into account the personal and social conditions within which the narrative inquiry takes place. An inquirer may explore the hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions of the people in the stories lived and told. Several questions may arise that may need to be addressed by the inquirer. For example, an inquirer may want to know what the environment is like for the people being studied, and may also examine the surrounding factors and forces that form each individual's context. As well, the inquirer may want to explore the relationship between and among people being studied.

The commonplace of temporality examines the events that people experience over time. It acknowledges that each event always has a past, present and future. When looking at this commonplace, the inquirer makes an attempt to understand that people, places and events are processes in transition rather than static occurrences.

### **Writing the Narrative: Accepting the Invitation to Question**

One of the key features of narrative thinking is asking the question, "What constitutes narrative thinking?" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 8). As the narrative begins to unfold for the researcher, it invites others to join our experiences and participate in the ideas presented (p. 8). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted from Peshkin's work,

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When I disclose what I have seen, my results invited other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth... but as positions about the phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries. (p. 8)

With narrative, I accepted the invitation to examine the events in my life and allow myself to question as I navigated through my writing in the temporality of space and time.

### **The Process of Narrative Inquiry**

#### **Living in the field as an EAL teacher.**

I have always said that my job is unique and is by far the most interesting and challenging teaching job one could ever have. This is due to all of the precious and unique students I have worked with and my lived experiences alongside their experiences in a Manitoba setting. All these shared experiences have generated a wealth of memories and stories that have helped me grow as a person and teacher. By looking at the way my life has unfolded along the lives of these students (Bruner, 2004, p. 709), and being awakened to the temporality, sociality and place in which they have occurred, allowed me to wonder how these experiences have helped to shape me personally and professionally. I believe that using narrative inquiry as a way of exploring my own experiences as an EAL teacher in Manitoba was the best way I could accomplish what I felt I needed to do from the perspective of research.

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Through my inquiry, I was able to explore how my teaching landscape shifted over the years of lived experiences as I worked with refugees in the Manitoba school system. It provided me with a way to reflect on my growth as a professional and a person who delivers professional development to teachers working with EAL learners. My inquiry will also contribute to the research by addressing a new perspective, that is, the voice of the teacher working with refugee students.

When I initially explored the methodology I could use for my research, I was drawn to Morris' (2002) comment on the "call of narrative" because I have always hoped that when I told the stories of my experiences working with this group of EAL learners, some greater learning may occur. This was my way of contributing to that "great ideal" (Bruner, 2004) in teaching. By sharing my stories of working with these students as a teacher in research, I seek to put teachers "in contact with valuable resources for moral thought and action" (Morris, 2002, p. 197). I was comfortable with this motivation for penning my stories because "such stories exert a kind of 'call'" (Morris, 2002, p. 197). It is from this perspective I positioned my writing from an inquiry into my own experiences based on the stories I have experienced as a former EAL teacher of refugee students.

### **Gathering and creating field texts: Collecting journals and remembered stories.**

Back in Yi Li's small office in May 2009, I took to heart the practicality of the suggestion to write on a daily basis. Shortly after that meeting, I began using an old daily agenda as a place to write the day's events, my thoughts and ideas that I found relevant or important to my research. Most importantly, the little white coil-bound book was a place

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where I wrote all my memory-reconstructions of stories I had experienced with students. I wrote private thoughts, secret stories and scribbled reminders for the future with the hope that I would return to these notes and they would make sense to me another point in time and in another space.

I felt very protective of my little book and was ultra-cautious about where I kept it at all times. These notes remind me of my deeply entrenched involvement in the lives of my former students and the distance I now kept. My responsibility was to keep these stories guarded and let few people know the details of the relationships between the pages of the book. These memories would “help fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of the landscape” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 83) as I moved further in my research. My little book helped me to “remake my past” (p. 85), and enhance and define my own personal and social growth as a teacher, mother and woman.

These gathered memories, scribbles and single words became my field text. From them, I created composite narratives of my own experiences that allowed me to ethically share my re-tellings so the identities of the students were guarded. They are not directly quoted stories, nor are they transcribed in any way, shape or form. They are simply my reworking of stories I heard, saw and felt through my days as an EAL teacher and inquirer. I continued to write on a daily basis and used these writings to create research text from this process.

### **Moving from field text to research text.**

I appreciated the method of narrative inquiry as it allowed me to attend to my own growth by giving me the freedom to express experiences, feelings, doubts, uncertainties,

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reactions, remembered stories and more (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I was free to write what I knew based on my own negotiations of meaning, while keeping in mind that the stories I heard have been shaped and reshaped by my own biases, experiences and personal narrative. As Coles (1989) stated, “If our job was to help our patients [students] understand what they had experienced by getting them to tell their stories, our job was also to realize that as active listeners we give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own” (p. 19). In my research, I made meaning of what I heard and restoried my memories of my experiences. I created composites of remembered stories in order to share my experiences lived alongside my students. These composite stories became a compilation of pseudonyms, experiences, jotted-down notes, journals and scribbles that have become my field text. I unpacked the happenings I had lived within these memories so I could navigate amidst them in the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry has been defined as “the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (Clandinin and Connelly as cited by LeMay, 2000, p. 9). This inquiry gave shape to my autobiographical writing and provided me with the materials from which I created meaningful research texts. Therefore, writing autobiographically about my experiences and restorying these experiences was a facet of writing research text from lived experience that became meaningful and applicable to my future. By examining my own experiences I gained a deeper understanding of myself as an educator, and contributed to literature while gaining more knowledge for the EAL learners and teachers with whom I work. This is significant for me and other researchers

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working with this particular group of EAL learners as the literature of teacher experiences working with refugee students is limited.

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework for narrative inquiry provided me with a foundation from which I could understand my shifting professional landscape and my hope to become a better educator within the three dimensions of the personal and social, past, present and future, and sense of place "These three dimensions are included in the story, the sometimes, restorying and in the later interpretations I make of the story to discern who I am" (LeMay, 2002, p. 10) in relation to my ability to support refugee high school students for success.

## **Ethical Considerations in Narrative Inquiry**

### **Tensions around sharing teacher and student stories.**

As I looked inward on my intent to write about my experiences in Manitoba as an EAL teacher and the stories I have experienced with former students, I hesitated because I was afraid of being perceived as being condescending or moralistic. Did I have the right to share these memories that hold such delicate information regardless of the guarded identities? Did I have a way of ensuring that the stories shared today would not be detrimental later? These are the social narratives I was a part of and from which I made meaning. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) "two senses of being in the midst- being in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, and being in the midst of a temporal, storied flow" (p. 65) drew me closer to a place within myself that forced me to negotiate the purpose of my own research. I remembered one of the valuable dialogues I



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had with a doctoral student with whom I had shared some of my writing. She was adamant that researchers should be cautious with the information we hold and make sure we are not writing for the purpose of “gratuitous story-telling” (Journal Entry, January, 2010). I was filled with many wonderings about how to maintain the anonymity of my students. Would the information that I remembered from my own perspective, reconstructed and restoried be enmeshed enough so as to guarantee anonymity? Would my own shared experiences compromise my professional landscape at a later time? Did I have “ownership” over my experiences that were lived alongside former students and teachers?

I negotiated all these tensions in autobiographical writing as I navigated through my inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “Researchers need to be sensitive to these stories” (p. 178). I needed to be sensitive to my own stories and to those that included the memories of my teaching and personal landscape. I needed to fictionalize my experiences and characters and acknowledge that as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted from Blaise’s (1993) work, “Everything, including autobiography and memoir, is fact because everything is autobiographical” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 180). As I continued to engage in narrative inquiry, these questions remained with me throughout my inquiry (p. 181).

### **Tension centered on temporality, people, action, certainty and context.**

When I began this narrative journey, there were great shifts happening personally and professionally. I had to accept that within this inquiry all of the interpretations and meanings of what I wrote was “an expression of something that was happening over

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time” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 29). As the “grand narrative” (p.30) throughout my inquiry, I experienced tensions as I moved from past to present to future. I came to see my inquiry as my process of making meaning in the autobiographical context based on where I was today. Added to this tension was the notion that people are “always in a process of personal change and from an educational point of view, it is important to narrate the person in terms of this process” (p.30). For me, this meant acknowledging that my autobiographical inquiry was a process I interpreted as a person who is in the process of personal growth. Also, with regards to action, narrative thinking is seen as a narrative sign. My actions, recollections of actions and retellings of occurrences are all significant and help to make meaning of my narrative history in this autobiographical inquiry.

Another tension felt is that through my inquiry a sense of uncertainty is expressed throughout my writing. This allows the inquiry to be interpreted in many ways and needs to be “treated as tentative” (p. 31). Finally, throughout my inquiry it is important to note that the context is always present. Due to my need to make meaning and sense of the people, events and things in my inquiry, I assumed that the context has been embedded through the stories and the characters that I have described. This context was able to help me make meaning in the grand narrative within the three dimensions of space, sociality and temporality. My narrative history has undoubtedly changed by the time that my inquiry was finished.

Early in my research and my experience with journaling, I came across many quotations about stories. I saved the following quotation from Chuck Palahaniuk for my last reflection as I conclude the method section of this inquiry. Although I did not read

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his novel *Invisible Monsters*, I felt his quote about stories had a direct relation to autobiographical narrative inquiry.

*No story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather we who read it are no longer the same interpreters.* (Palahaniuk, 1999)

For me, this summarized the spirit of narrative inquiry. It recognized that each story and experience has a story within it. It encompassed the notion of temporality, sociality, and place within storytelling and the fluidity that exists as we make meaning from our lived and shared experiences.

My personal story has changed since I started taking the narrative inquiry course in September 2010, and when I returned to read it, it no longer had the same meaning as I was now a different interpreter. I moved on to the next section of my writing, sharing my own experiences as an EAL teacher working with refugee students who came from very diverse backgrounds. I was mindful of the wakefulness that characterized my inquiry as I negotiated between the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

### **Reflecting on the Metaphor**

The metaphor of paths or pathways was one that came to me as I moved back and forth through the proposal stage of my narrative inquiry. In early September, 2011 the date was set for my thesis proposal defense. I knew that I did not want to use the conventional form to represent my inquiry proposal. I chose instead to use photographs that I had taken to represent the ideas of my proposal so that I could speak to them from a

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narrative perspective. Throughout my writing I refer to “journeys”, and “landscapes” and “navigating”. With this in mind, I found a natural transition in the use of the path/pathway metaphor in my writing to precede each of the chapters and stories within my work. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “Sometimes a narrative inquirer can select a metaphor and hold too firmly to it, with the result that the research text develops a feel as if the field texts were being squeezed into an artificial form” (p. 163). I did not want the metaphor to bind me tightly to the stories that I was writing and so I left the metaphor as a broader guide throughout my inquiry. This indeed facilitated “in the creation of the narrative form”. As a result, the pictures are only labeled with the place and the date. I chose to not make meaning for the reader by adding commentary as to what motivated me to insert each of the particular photographs before each section. Instead, each photograph can be freely interpreted by the reader which liberates the reader to find their own response and meaning.

The metaphor of a pathway lends itself to the journey of inquiry. It also lends itself to the image of moving ahead in whatever direction you chose. The path can lead to great discoveries at every bend. Through my inquiry I discovered many paths on which I could travel. The ones that I chose spoke to me as both inquirer and participant of my lived experiences. By matching each section or sub-section of this inquiry with the metaphor of a path and a photograph, I expressed through the creative process the negotiations in meaning that I made through my inquiry.

**Chapter Four: Winding Paths**<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Ribeira Grande, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 2011 Picture courtesy of Dr. Antoinette Gagne.

## **Inquiring into My Experiences as an EAL Teacher Working with Refugee Students**

Narrative inquiry allows me as a writer to meld research with the creative spirit I feel is within me. Without this methodology, I feel the voice of the teacher in research would be more difficult to portray. Through narrative inquiry, I am afforded the freedom to write from my own voice and experiences. These experiences – recorded in journals and remembered stories - have become my field texts for the following section in this thesis. The way that I chose to write this section of my work was to reflect and write on the various experiences I have had throughout the years and put them into sequences of journals and remembered stories. The journals come from actual notes, scribbles, text and other documents I have created throughout my journey. The remembered stories are composites of memories that I have meshed together to recreate and retell the experiences I had within the ethical boundaries of my research.

Each story unfolds within the three dimensions of my inquiry - temporality, sociality and place. I chose to use the metaphor of the pathway for my work as it naturally became the analogy I kept coming back to while writing my stories. Each path to every story has been different, yet each path leads me to where I am now in my inquiry.

Clearing New Paths<sup>6</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Caldeira Velha, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 10,2011<sup>7</sup> Ribeira Grande, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 10,2011

**My first encounter with a refugee student – Mary**

*This story comes from an experience I had with a group of newcomers in the school I was working in during 1999. It is a composite of three students - two girls and a boy - who entered at the same time but came from two different linguistic backgrounds.*

In the fall of 1999, my oldest daughter was a young baby and I was returning from an early maternity leave to ensure a permanent contract. It was late September and I was in my second year as a resource teacher. I was informed by our secretary that new students would be arriving from a war-torn country. I had heard rumblings in the weeks earlier that one of the neighbouring high schools had received several of these students and were overwhelmed with what to do with them. I was apprehensive and excited to meet these kids. Other colleagues in my school division had reported at meetings they had also received new students from war-torn areas. For our school division, this was completely foreign as there was very little cultural diversity in the community. When I heard that we too were going to receive students, I could not help but wonder how our school would respond.

On a crisp morning in September, I was called to the office to meet Mary. She stood there with another boy, who I found out was also a newcomer and a neighbour and a year younger. Whoever had brought them had left them at school as they had other children to place in schools around the division.



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*My sweet Mary, who came from Yugoslavia. She had not a word of English and I could not speak her language. One of my first experiences with her is perhaps one of the saddest that I have ever had. She came to my office and sat at my computer. Without thinking, I went to the CNN homepage to see if we could connect on some level. My intentions were good but what happened after that made me realize I had so much work to do. Mary stared at the images on CNN.com that popped up. Instantly she began to cry; no, sob at the sight of detached limbs and bloodied heads that were on my screen. It felt like the corpses were right there in my office. To this day, I cannot erase the image of this beautiful, golden 12-year-old child, hysterical in what was supposed to be a safe place. (Journal entry, September 14, 2010)*

I have not told anyone this story until now, mainly because I felt so devastated that I had caused her so much pain. But something in me changed that day and to a certain degree, I am grateful for that experience. However, looking back now, I am horrified that I was unaware of who she was and what she had witnessed and that I had contributed to her nightmares that night. I wish I would have been given some professional development ahead of time to better cope with students like Mary. At the time, receiving students from war-affected countries was still a new phenomenon in our school division. Other neighbouring divisions had experienced influxes of students arriving from countries like Bosnia, Rwanda, and other areas of conflict, but for many of the suburban areas in the city, schools were struggling to know how to prepare for these students as they arrived and what to do with them once they were here.

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This incident was one of the critical spaces in my life as an EAL teacher that allowed me to reflect on what my role was as a teacher. It helped me realize that working with refugees required more than the knowledge and attributes of an “average” teacher. I put the word in quotations because I believe that most educators who enter the field come in with a willingness to be more than just a teacher. However, having worked in the classroom for years in French, science and language arts, I am able to see that being a teacher who works with EAL learners is by far the most difficult and the most rewarding job I have ever had.

As I think back to my experience with Mary, I wonder about what could we have done as a school to better prepare for the arrival of these students from war-affected areas of the world? Did I receive sufficient professional development, if any, in this area to address the complexities of working with students who may have experienced trauma, gaps in their education and the horrors of war? What were more experienced teachers doing in other school districts that I could have done when Mary arrived so I could help ease her into her new surroundings?

The experience that I shared with Mary was a defining moment in my professional career. I learned many things about myself and teaching that I had never considered until I met her. She was the first student I worked with that had been identified as an EAL learner. Having her identified as needing support for language allowed me to be subconsciously prepared for the challenge that would lie ahead of me. However, it was not until after I met her that I realized how much work I had to do professionally. I also realized this relationship between teacher and student had shifted within minutes of our first meeting because of my lack of knowledge. When Mary

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arrived in 1999, I remember feeling excited and nervous, like I was about to meet a long-lost relative. There was a sense of giddiness as this was the first encounter I would have with a “real EAL student”. I had not spent much time considering what I could have done to make her transition into her new school as easy as possible. I was too focused on how I was going to handle speaking to her, and introducing her to teachers and how she would manage the crazy lunch hour at this large school.

To many, the idea of having to teach children who bring with them so much emotional baggage is frightening. Mary’s arrival in the school sparked a keen interest in this realm of education, and it also sparked fear. It was evident by the actions I took on the first day, in fact the first hour upon her arrival, that I really knew nothing about her or this situation. I had no prior information about the child coming into my care or how our school would handle such a challenge. The barriers I faced at the time were both personal and systemic.

As a mother, I knew instinctively this girl would need special attention. I knew I had to make her comfortable, safe and welcome in our school. Yet my desperate attempt at connecting with her caused her to live another traumatic experience and caused me to feel like I had done something irreparable. For me, my encounter with Mary became an example of what many schools were going through at the time as they received students from similar backgrounds. And even though other schools were receiving newcomer refugees, we were working in isolation and very little collaborative, proactive work had been done to prepare both teachers and students for Mary. At the time, the experience I had with Mary was reflective of the lack of research and information about teacher experiences working with EAL students. This was evident in my own experience in the

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school and in the larger EAL community where very little sharing was occurring and many teachers were working to the best of their abilities without support.

Today the approach to the arrival of new students has changed greatly in the school division I work in and in the province. The EAL teacher community has become much more aware of the steps that need to be taken when students arrive. Committees have been developed provincially to look at the intake process of any EAL learner in five of the urban school divisions with whom I network. This shift includes my own division. Our school division has also adopted “Initial Reception Protocol” to ensure that information is gathered about students’ past experiences and receiving teachers, including the EAL teacher who usually has the first point of contact with these students, are prepared. As a support teacher, I can use Mary’s story to illustrate the importance of both gathering the information and sharing it with staff so there are fewer surprises.

While each student is an individual with varied experiences, many students with limited or interrupted schooling have experienced trauma before they leave their own country as well as after they arrive in the new country. This trauma may have been through the direct effects of war, civil unrest, poverty, flight and life as a refugee, and settlement and adjustment to life in Canada and a new school environment in a new language. Looking back, I see that my experience with Mary reinforced this position in the literature. The arrival of Mary into a new environment that was ill-prepared may have caused her trauma through settlement and adjustment to life in Canada within our school. Because I was the person who first met Mary and was given the task of integrating her into the school environment, I felt an enormous amount of personal pressure to do the very best for this child. In an instant, I was brought closer to “the harrowing atrocities of

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violence and terrorism in the contemporary world” (Stewart, 2010 p.185) with the careless click of the mouse on the computer. Although this was not purposeful on my part, for many years, I was never quite able to deal with what I had potentially done to this student.

It was not until I began networking with other colleagues in the same situation that I could relieve myself of some of the shame and guilt I felt over this situation. Perhaps if I had had someone to help me navigate through this experience from the beginning, the personal barriers of fear and shame would not have surfaced. Having said this, I feel it was these experiences and the inquiry into these experiences that permitted me to grow as an EAL curriculum support teacher. The title of my position implies I am there to help with the academic programming for the students. Today I find myself mentoring new teachers and guiding them through the process of receiving new EAL students in their programs. Some of the students have the very same backgrounds that Mary had. With my support, I feel the ecological system that Stewart (2010) describes is far more attainable as I work to create a team that collectively responds to the needs of the people in it through creative and collaborative efforts.

**Pathways Leading to Bridges<sup>7</sup>**



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<sup>7</sup> Ribeira Grande, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 10,2011

### **Experiences lived beyond the classroom: Jessica and her mother**

*The following story is a compilation of events that occurred throughout the 2010-2011 school year. The names and identities of the characters have been changed and the story was written as a composite of events that occurred throughout my year as an EAL curriculum support teacher.*

Sometimes silence speaks louder than words. I am reminded of the first time that year that I saw Jessica in the hallway at my new office. How she lingered about wanting to talk but yet not saying too many words. How did I know she wanted to tell me about the ordeal her mother had just re-experienced upon her return to Canada from Colombia? When she and I met in the empty halls, I was ecstatic to see a familiar face and we both embraced like long lost friends. She graduated from high school in June and is now in a program searching for employment. She must find a full-time job and move out of her mother's rental unit in order to fulfill government requirements for welfare. She will move out with her brother into an apartment in Manitoba housing and she tells me she is happy and scared all at once. We are both leaving the building so I offer to drop her off at home so she does not have to take the bus. She tells me about her brothers and sister and her boyfriend. She begins to tell me they have had ups and downs and he pushed her in a bar and she almost broke it off with him permanently that day. I tell her she is in control of herself and nobody has the right to hurt her or make her feel unsafe or scared. I tell her he will likely do it again. She tells me "he better not" and before we know it, I arrive at her house. Not enough time to really see how she is doing. I ask her to call me to

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meet for lunch and now that we have each other's emails, it will be easier to plan a get-together.

Looking back, I could sense her need to talk and that perhaps she needed to let share some untold stories that she had. She did not need to tell me how hurt and embarrassed she was. I already knew by her actions and lowered glances. Her darkened liquid-like black eyes hardly met mine during our talk and I wanted to know more but couldn't ask at the time.

I was fortunate to meet Jessica in the hallway just a few short days after I drove her home. This time we talked more intensely about her mother and revealed some personal struggles that her mother had been working through. She said that these struggles were impacting her life. I knew this was an invitation to talk; an invitation to become a listener into a secret story that was about to unfold right in front of my eyes. That day Jessica shared one of the most powerful stories I had ever heard. She told me about her feelings of abandonment living in an all-girls boarding school and the violence she had witnessed as a victim of the Colombian drug cartel. I asked few questions and just let her speak, pause and cry, and then speak again. I cried too, and at that point I knew there was so much more that needed to be said. Our conversation was filled with sad glances and awkward pauses. At the end, when we both knew that shared silence was the clue we needed to move on, I asked her how she felt after sharing something so secret and powerful with me. She said her heart was really tight previously and felt like nobody would ever understand. Now that she shared with me, her heart had space to think of something else.



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This was a profound moment in my life and I have been privileged to know many secret details of many lives. I wonder if I was the only teacher that knew any of this and how often these memories would have played out in Jessica's head as she sat in my EAL class when she first came to Canada. I felt like I was in the midst of her world and she had given me permission to enter. She was in control and I was the one who had nothing to control. I was her teacher, she was my student. The artist does not own the work. The work owns the artist. Jessica owned the story. I heard the story and now the story owned me.

Several questions jump into my mind as I think back to the experiences I had while I was teaching Jessica. When she first entered the school system, she was greeted by our front office staff and I was called down to the office. At that point, we were just beginning the formal process of gathering information about families upon arrival. I wonder about the information we ask families to share with us as a school system when they first arrive. Is it fair to ask families about their past lives in our western world when in their pasts their very existence has always been hidden? Is it right to expect families would be forthcoming with such private and intense information about them and their children when schools have not been trusted institutions? What processes are in place today so information is gathered from families? Are the teachers or school staff trained in culturally sensitive issues for each country represented? Are they prepared ahead of time to understand the political and social events that may be occurring in that country? Do we even have a right to delve into these areas without building trust with the families? Should our process of intake be revisited so as to create a welcoming atmosphere and perhaps attend to the histories of the families later?

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For Jessica, the change in schools and the connections to her friends, family and teachers were all extremely significant. However, more importantly, her story, her past and the associated emotions were always percolating on the surface of what appeared to be a well-adjusted, quiet student who had experienced gaps in her prior schooling. Perhaps it was her hope for a better future that kept all her sadness locked away until she felt she could share what she was truly living in my classroom.

Jessica's story speaks to the importance of trust and the relationships built with EAL teachers. Jessica's ability to share such a difficult story with me was critical for her to move forward as a young woman and come to terms with her own history. She shared her story with me years after I had taught her in my classroom. I wonder if the relationship I had built with this student had moved past teacher and student, a set of roles which has created confusion within me as a professional. At the time of her sharing, I was no longer professionally obligated to act. I felt she needed a person whom she trusted to listen to what she had to say. I was caught between the tensions of being a teacher, a counselor and a friend.

In retrospect, I can see it was the relationship I had built with Jessica over the past years that allowed her to share her secret story with me. If we had not created the relationship in the first place, perhaps she would have never allowed me to know what she was really carrying in her heart and head while she was in my class. Looking back, I can now see the importance of giving our learners time to create trust so we can better understand who they really are. Jessica's story could have occurred in the last year I had her as a student but she was not ready to tell it. I was both surprised, proud and touched that she felt she could seek me out to share her life with me again.

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Becoming a part of Jessica's life story again also meant I had to inquire into my own beliefs and experiences about whether or not I could ever truly understand what she had lived through. Many personal and professional tensions were created by being born in Canada, having access to a safe educational system and never having to worry about personal persecution. These are facets of my life I often take for granted. As a teacher working with students who experienced trauma like Jessica, would I ever really fully understand the complexity of her life experience? From my privileged background would I ever have enough empathy to support her in my classroom? These questions will always linger.

I am reminded of Neumann's (1997) article, *Ways without words: Learning from silence and story in post-Holocaust lives*, when I think of Jessica's story. In my classroom, there was a silent story occurring on a daily basis. Jessica had been waiting for the right time to share what she wanted with a trusted individual. Today I am awakened to the silence that waited for several years to break. As an EAL teacher, I am reminded that the relationships I have built may last longer than the time in the classroom. I never expected to have the relationships I have now with former students when I first started teaching. I would have never guessed I would still be in touch with both students and parents once they left the program in which I was working. These are all separate stories that have unfolded as the years have gone by.

**Rocky Paths<sup>8</sup>**



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<sup>8</sup> Tuka Tula Restaurant at Santa Barbara Beach, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 10,2011

**A story of trust: John**

*Working with students with diverse backgrounds and unique personalities is what makes the job of an EAL teacher unique. Like everything else, in this type of job, you learn to expect the unexpected. This is a remembered story of a student whom I taught in 2009-2011. The names and events have been changed to protect the student's identity.*

I do not know where to begin with this story but it is safe to say that I started off as a detective and evolved into the role of lawyer. From there, my role shifted into then into the role of mother in the denouement of my story with John. John was also a refugee from the war in Yugoslavia. He lived most of his life, from the age of two to 13, in a camp. He was abandoned by both parents and raised by his grandmother. When he arrived in Canada, it was not difficult to conceive he would be attracted to a life of crime as this lifestyle was all he knew. The trauma to his brain and heart was so deep that the pathways created would require such intense therapy and many would “write him off”. John was known for telling stories or rather “telling tales” by his friends and teachers. So when he disclosed to me the details of a crime, I did not want to believe him. At the time, I remember feeling he was longing for my attention and he was so far behind the others in the class, he needed to go to extremes to get me to spend some extra time with him. It was not until he drew the location of the crime and told me the gruesome plan that I truly understood this was not just a “rousing tale”. He drew the victim's house, and detailed the clothing he and his cohorts wore and the weapons they had. I sat beside him and listened and watched as he sketched in the details of the beautiful home in an upper-

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scale neighbourhood. I remember asking him if he had told anyone else about this and he replied he had tried to tell another teacher but she said he was making it up.

This was his autobiography at one point in time, during the space of his teenage years in his new country Canada. I do not know why but I did not panic. I wonder if it was because I felt his deep remorse or if I just knew he needed to admit it. He later said he knew that if he told me I would report it, and by reporting it to the police, he would not have to deal with all the bad dreams he was having. John believes very much in the power of the subconscious and was tortured by nightmares and visions of ghosts and occurrences that influenced his decision to tell me about the crime he had committed.

I did report John and he was arrested. I stayed with him from the time the police came to pick him up, led him to the police station in handcuffs where he was fingerprinted, questioned and locked up until he was released on his own recognizance. The detectives were stymied by the fact he had confessed to this crime. From their eyes, it was a cold case and they really had no suspects. The victims continued to live their lives until he confessed, leaving many more unanswered questions.

This story speaks to me of the tension around ethics when working with students who have so many emotional and social needs. As I retell the story from my viewpoint, I think the entire process with John was about hearing what his interpretation of the crime was, and then making my own interpretation. I recall hearing the police talking about how some parts of his story did not match what the victims had said, and I was drawn back to Bruner's (2004) comment about the rousing tale not being the "right" tale from the perspective of truth in narrative. To this day, John claims someone else was with him

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when he committed the crime. The detectives I spoke with dispute this completely. I had many wonderings about the incidents that took place in my life while John was the focus of my attention. I wonder why I never questioned whether or not John was telling the truth. Why did the other teacher not believe the story? In my small classroom, I was privy to such a secret story and I was in the midst of my own story unfolding with this experience. I was “falling in love” with the idea of being everything to these students while “slipping in and out of full involvement” as a teacher and inquirer (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 80).

So I think of my little book full of stories. John’s story is one I detailed carefully after I heard it and added several entries later as part of the ongoing narrative experience. I am grateful I did write it down and my thoughts moved from just being in a place of stories to composing a field text about it. I am grateful I kept the story for legal reasons as I was asked by the justice system to provide an official account of what my experience had been.

After several months and several court dates, the victims surprisingly did not press charges after they learned about John’s personal history. To me, this is a true miracle. The nature of the crime would have landed John (who was actually over 18 so he was being treated as an adult in the legal system) in jail for at least five years. John told me the lawyers said he was lucky to have had help because he could have been behind bars for at least 25 years. I am not sure if I believe that version. What I do believe is that by some act of fate, John confessed to a crime he committed and was given a second chance to live as a free man in Canada because all charges were dropped. I wonder what he will tell his children about this story in the future. Or will he even ever share this

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secret story again? Today I still see him casually in the community and we embrace at each meeting. It is an embrace that holds a story of life shared and told that will forever stay in my heart.

When I think about John I look at the experiences we had as teacher and student. I wonder if more was needed to be done to support this student emotionally and psychologically. It is clear from his past significant events had traumatized him. However, even now in our community, he was continuing to demonstrate behaviors that were unsafe for him and others. What could we have done as a school to support John when we first learned of his past trauma? Could his crime have been avoided if we had been proactive as an educational system? What supports were in place after he confessed so he could continue to gain academic success while dealing with his psycho-social needs? Were we too late now that he was involved with the justice system? Did we help him foster his own resilience and did he still want to make things work in his new world?

As John's teacher, the disclosure of such sensitive information put me in a very uncomfortable situation personally and professionally. I was terrified he was telling the truth and on several levels, his story revealed to me the type of person he was. If indeed the disclosure was true, then I was dealing with someone who had committed a horrific crime and was sitting right next to me at the end of the day. I remember feeling petrified that I was alone in my classroom with him and at any given moment he could relive the experience and I would not be able to handle the situation. I was anxious as he indicated the location of the crime and the detail he put into it. I felt at the time this was not really happening and he was playing a joke on me. How was it that someone I thought I knew could really have such a secret story? Why had he not ever told someone before me? I



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think back and see that John really did try to tell someone else. It was the teacher who did not believe him. His cry for help had not been noticed earlier and again he was making his plea for help, but this time it was with me.

For weeks, I could not sleep. I thought about many things. I relived the experience at the police station over and over, night after night. I constantly got up in the middle of the night to check my windows out of anxiety, fearing that someone might be outside. I worried about the safety of my family. Now that I had such powerful information about this young man, would he regret telling me? Would there be retribution for helping him with his statement to the police? I also became very nervous about his friends who would come to visit at school and were not students there. Although I vaguely shared all this with my husband, I could not really talk about this situation. I was in crisis by myself. I had no one to turn to and the days went on without my ever receiving support.

John's actions also created many tensions between us, as teacher and student. He felt I was treating him differently and I felt I had no choice but to do the best I could in a difficult situation. There were many classes that were full of power struggles between us, and at times I felt like I could no longer keep teaching. At the time, I did not realize the impact this relationship was having on me. I could not see how I was again dealing with issues that I was not prepared to deal with. Although I was glad he trusted me, I was feeling completely overwhelmed and lost.

John's story also prompted the school and other teachers to act differently towards me once they had some information about what happened to him following his arrest. Due to his absenteeism, teachers began asking questions and the school felt some staff

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were on a “need to know basis” and given snippets of information about the events that unfolded amidst our school landscape. But more importantly, after John was released, he began to talk about his experiences more freely to other students and word quickly spread about the seriousness of his actions. As a result, whether teachers meant it or not, I found them more resistant to providing John with the academic support he so desperately needed. He was behind in much of his school work and sought out what he had missed during those tumultuous days. As his case manager, it became increasingly difficult to ask teachers for extra work or “a little bit of slack” because he was going through difficult times. I felt they had written him off as a criminal and his days in school were numbered. It was very difficult to get empathy from other teachers and the academic support that was required to keep John in school for much of that semester. Were the teachers seeing something about the entire situation that I could not see because I was so deeply involved? Was it that outside of the LAL Centre, other students were in similar situations and he would be just like any other student who got involved with the justice system? Did they feel the systemic barriers were insurmountable for this student and rehabilitation would not be possible due to his traumatic past? As time moved forward, these questions remain as I have never been able to hear other teachers speak about this incident.

I remember the report, *Composing Lives: A Narrative Account into the Experiences of Youth Who Left School Early* (Clandinin, Steeves and Li et al., 2010) and feeling that John’s story could have easily been one of the narratives in this piece of research. He was a clear example of the “resonant narrative threads” (p. 443) that were identified in this work. The conversational space he required to deal with some of his

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personal issues was deeply entrenched in his search for help and his disclosure. The relationship created between him and myself was also resonant of the relationships described in stories co-written by the participants in these studies.

Today I can see I played an interesting role as an advocate for students like John in our school landscape. I feel the tension of knowing how frightening situations like these can be, and yet I know it is my job to help other teachers continue their teaching and help advocate for these students when crises arise. Perhaps by creating dialogue spaces for both the teacher and student when difficulties do occur, teachers can feel much more supported. They will know there is someone to listen to their concerns which will help their fears dissipate. For me, this incident was one of many and I am sure others have felt the same way. The experience lived alongside John is reminiscent of Kanu's (2008) where teachers may take on "non-academic roles" (p. 925). The tensions between lived experience, human emotion, and systemic issues in John's story contributed to part of my understanding of how to better myself as I continue in my job as a support teacher.

**Circular Paths<sup>9</sup>**



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<sup>9</sup> Caldeiras das Furnas, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 17, 2011

**Refugees displaced again in our city: Edward and family**

*This story is taken from a series of true events based on my journal notes: Sudanese Housing Situation- October 27, 2004. These events were made public after a newspaper article was written for the Winnipeg Free Press. Many people in the community got involved to help this family including several school staff, administrators, a retired police officer, politician and a pastor from a local church*

**One of my students tells me he is being thrown out of his apartment soon. He is a child and his role in the family is one of translator, father and general caregiver because he has the strongest language ability. The weather has been extremely cold these days and snow is on the ground. Edward is a great boy and I have to do everything I can to help him out. What a bad time to be asked to leave. It seems like nobody cares about these people. I do not know who to call. I wonder if the social worker already knows. (Journal entry, October 27, 2004)**

It is fall in Winnipeg and it is not surprising that the winds howl at night, causing a wind-chill that would make anyone want to head to warmer worlds. The news Edward brings is bad. He and his family must leave by Halloween night. He is frantic. He paces up and down in the small resource room. I could smell his sweat from the nerves. He is 14 and his brother is 15. His mother has babies at home. Oh my goodness, who do I call? What do I do? I knew at this point I was not going home at 4:00 p.m. as usual to pick up my own children. I would have to make babysitting arrangements with my family and sound sheepish when asking for their permission to come home later. I

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struggle with the belief that I feel in their eyes I am not a suitable mother. How can I stay at school late again to help other kids and ignore my own? But the plans are made and I hang up the telephone, slightly ashamed. Oh well, Edward's mother cannot help him at this point. I am sure that she is overwhelmed with the children that she is caring for at home. He needs my help; they need my help. I move to my computer in the hopes of finding my old contact list.

I know this could get difficult. I know the family will survive because they have survived far worse. How embarrassing for us as a province. We bring these people here only to provide limited services and then we treat them like they are unwanted. We should really be ashamed of what we are doing. I know Edward's family is a grateful family and they would not jeopardize their living arrangements by breaking laws or not paying rent. In fact, I know they do not have food at home sometimes because they have to pay for rent and bus passes for their children to come to school.

After much research, I find the family is being evicted without due process and the protocol was not followed because the government agency did not think they would understand even if they tried to explain. Language and comprehension should not be the barrier to make these people feel as if they were displaced again. I was disgusted but I had no time to waste with feelings of anger. We had to move quickly.

Time passes quickly but contacting Manitoba Housing and everyone I know seems to get the proper people aware of this situation. I call every single contact I could think of, including a pastor who was instrumental in providing community support, immigrant and refugee services in the city, a superintendent who heard their stories and

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was a concerned citizen, a former police officer who volunteered at the school and several political figures to “get the ball rolling”. Together we took on Manitoba Housing.

The end result was the family was being evicted unjustly and the story made the Winnipeg Free Press. With my contacts, we won. I was happy to have Edward’s family settled back into their crowded apartment. Moreover, I was happy their stories had been told and they had felt some kind of validation after the arduous process. They had been treated as if they were still refugees in this new country (Stewart, 2010) and they suffered the effects of trauma right here in Canada. I wondered whether there are certain factors that helped this family survive this ordeal. Was it the resiliency they had fostered through past experiences? Could it be their hope to make this new landscape a peaceful and safe one transcended through all the challenges? Was it that the community around them could finally understand their needs and move together to advocate for this family?

This housing incident brought two things to the forefront in my experience. The first is I had a great deal invested in these students emotionally, personally and educationally. The second is that somehow I knew their lack of language and personal circumstances were barriers that prevented them from having equal access to all the opportunities other Canadians have. It was at that point I realized something more needed to be done for this population besides just accepting them into Canadian society. My role had changed and I knew at this point I was more than just a teacher.

It can be very difficult for teenagers to be in school and have to focus on much of the daily routine required of Canadian school life when they have many other issues to deal with. Edward and his siblings had very little schooling but enough experience to

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know they needed to seek out the resources within their own reach to help their family. I admire them so much for being resilient and hopeful enough to survive another potential displacement here in Canada without leaving school. For many, dealing with such difficult circumstances would be enough to break the human spirit. I wonder what might have happened if they did not have advocates working to help their family. I wonder if they had not had enough English to communicate with me if they would they have been thrown out on the cold street by forceful outside agencies that were willing to exploit their lack of language as a means of justification for eviction. I wonder how many other students were living through the same ordeal in Canada, but were either afraid to say anything or did not have the communication skills to make their concerns known. I also think of the responsibility of the school in this situation. In this case, the school was able to get extremely involved and dedicated many resources to this family. Is every school able to provide the supports required if this situation occurred today?

Edward's story was difficult to unpack as I navigated through my inquiry. I struggled with the reality that his story actually got the attention of other members in the community even though many other families were going through the same types of ordeals but were powerless. At the time, I was amazed at how quickly the events unfolded and how many people were called to action. As his teacher, I felt if I had not advocated for his family, they may have not had the opportunity to remain where they were living. Looking back, I can now see how this experience opened doors for me to become the involved adult in Edward's life to enlist others to work as advocates for students. It was the first time I felt surrounded by adults who had invested in this family and were willing to be limitless with what they would do for Edward.



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This unified collaboration also demonstrated how little teachers really know about the pressures these students may be facing. Perhaps it would have been useful to talk to Edward on a more frequent basis about his concerns and then share that information with other teachers. As educators, I know we do the very best with what information we have within the various teaching landscapes. For the classroom teacher, perhaps it would have been supportive to know that Edward's family was struggling to adapt to their new lodging, and subsequently the reality that they were being displaced yet again.

Looking forward, I see Edward's story as a catalyst that prompts me to look to the many places around the school landscape where I can find support for EAL learners. I see this experience as opening opportunities to build understanding within an entire community that is changing in demographics. Perhaps the immediacy of this story led to a development in the connections of the micro-systems (Stewart, 2010) in Edward's life. These micro-systems, "the immediate environment in which the individual lives and includes the closer interpersonal relations with the person's family, relatives, peers, teachers, or others" who participate in the student's life, can be connected through the larger meso-system that is formed when "the individual moves into a new setting"(p. 19). This meso-system of support can be a bridge to connect student and familial isolation within the school micro-system.

The research with regards to teacher involvement in the lives of their students is poignant. As DeCapua et al. (2007) point out, "[t]he most important factor in establishing a successful program is having teachers who care deeply about this segment of the student population... team members need to be familiar with the resources available both in and out of school" ( p. 44). Being the EAL teacher was more than just a curricular

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expectation for me. Although the academic programming was in place, resources outside of the school were a necessity to support Edward in a holistic manner.

Today I still wonder how many students are living these painful moments in their young lives. I heard the local housing area where many refugee newcomers are living is going to shut its doors to them and make the housing into condominiums. How many other families require the support of the meso-system today? Are teachers motivated and do they have the energy to advocate for the students? Is it their place to initiate this advocacy? Or is there a way to collaborate amongst stakeholders so Edward's story is not echoed again?

**Cloud-Covered Pathways<sup>10</sup>**



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<sup>10</sup> Sete Cidades, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 11,2011

**The boy who never went to school at all: James**

*This story is written as a composite based on the characteristics and experiences I had while working with several boys from ages 12-16. The identities of the boys have been blended into one character. I used several combined experiences to create this story and generate a journal that was based on my experiences with them.*

*The school year ended somewhat insignificantly for James. He had survived a year without the intensive programming he needed and deserved. I cannot believe it took so long for everyone to come to the same place and acknowledge how little this boy actually knew with regards to literacy and numeracy, and that much of his behavioral issues and anxiety revolved around him feeling inadequate amongst his peers. This year James is in Grade 9 and although his school year started off well, I can see the same thing happening to him when he first entered our school system in Grade 8.*

*When James first came to my attention I was in the midst of two professional landscapes; with dual roles: that of an EAL support teacher for other schools and working in the classroom part-time. In May 2010 James' family had arrived in our school division and an intake meeting was held at the local middle school to gather as much information as possible before the children started classes. I remember the first time I saw James. He was a small boy with messy hair and scratches on his face. His father and an older sister came to the meeting with him. At that time, James was entering Grade 8 while and his sister was registered in Grade 9. We knew the language barrier would be one we could not surpass so we hired someone who we thought could help us. The interpreter found it difficult to speak to the family as the language listed as the*

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*primary language on the registration form was not one he was comfortable using. I found out months later from James' sister that their father had actually fled his birth country, moved to a neighbouring country, and married a local woman. The father could speak some Arabic but he spoke a tribal language as his primary language. However, he was afraid to list his primary language as the language he spoke because throughout his own life, he was considered a refugee and it was neither acceptable nor safe to speak his first language. In Canada he would not take the chance of admitting his first language for fear of his own safety. I could sense this was going to be a tough meeting from the beginning. Although we began slowly, it appeared that James' father was in a rush to get to another appointment and so we quickly proceeded through the divisional intake form as fast as possible. I am not sure if he wanted to get out of there quickly or if he was so uncomfortable in this setting I was mistaking his desire to leave for nervousness.*

*Thus James entered the middle school setting and the school was aware of his lack of any previous formal education. He was a boy who truly did not have any prior education. He knew nothing about our academic curriculum, school routines, playgrounds or expectations. The plan was to register James at his local catchment area school with the expectation there would be support for him there. I spent time with the school planning for James' programming. We discussed the need for intensive support in the classroom and how his curricular outcomes would be completely different than those of other EAL students due to his missing educational background. (Journal entries, March 2011)*

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Every day I listen to the news in the morning, paying particular attention to the stories that involve minors or newcomers to Canada. I have constant wonderings about the past students with whom I have worked and I often drift to the ones who are currently in the schools I am trying to support. In particular, I conjure up the images of those boys who have arrived in Canada in the middle school setting with little or no previous schooling. I can feel my own anxiety rising as I think back to some of the experiences I had in providing assistance to what we would call a literacy, academics and language student in phase 1 from Africa. But this day I did not have to listen to the news; I just had to set foot in a local high school to hear some frightening accounts of how life was going for James.

“He has a restraining order against another student in the school. We can’t allow him as a school to wander the hallways because he is a safety issue for others.” This was the comment I heard as I entered a local high school to work on a behavior intervention plan for this boy who had been in our school system for only three years. He had never been to school in his country of origin and his behavior in the high school was of danger to himself and others.

It was halfway through the first term in November 2010 that James’ name came up at a follow-up meeting. At that time I learned the school was experiencing great difficulty with James from a behavioral standpoint. From their perspective, he was defiant, oppositional, manipulative and angry. He was beginning to exhibit dangerous behaviors to himself and others within the school and the neighbouring community. He was also outwardly defiant to authority, and within the community outside agencies such as the police and local child protection services had been involved. The school kept track

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of the many meetings, emails, telephone calls and informal discussions with all the people who had been involved with James and they felt at this point he could no longer attend regular school classes. They were about to ask James to find another school and they had the documentation necessary to prove that this school was not working for him. There were plans put in place and many of the comments the teachers had were in regards to his personality and behavior.

Combined excerpts taken from observations made while behavioral intervention plans were being written at the beginning of September, 2010

*“James can be very impulsive, anxious and defiant. He enjoys humour and one-on-one activities with an adult with whom he has a connection. He enjoys hands-on activities such as cooking and building. He is curious and will ask many questions around a variety of topics such as relationships, culture, religion, music, sports, etc.”*

*“He will behave in an outwardly angry manner, e.g., swearing, walking away, refusing to participate but the cause of this behavior appears to be anxiety around lacking skills, being embarrassed and ‘looking stupid’. James can often participate in a debriefing session around these behaviors at a later time when he has calmed down but has limited self-reflection and problem-solving skills. At times James has self-initiated an apology. He desires the approval of peers and is easily embarrassed. He will become angry if he feels he has been made to look inferior in any way. Although when James escalates he becomes verbally aggressive, he does not have a history of physical aggression towards others.”*

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*“James has no friends at school. He will interact with some of the boys in the LAL program in a limited way but the relationships are superficial. Based on classroom observations completed by Ms. Finster within the EAL classroom, it does not appear that James is seen as a person of power amongst the group. He is a periphery member drawn to those that he perceives as powerful.”*

*“James is having difficulty transitioning to his new school. He has sworn at administration, teaching staff and educational assistants. However, he does verbalize a preference for some female staff - two of the educational assistants and the LAL teacher. At times, James does not demonstrate respect for authority figures regardless of position.”*

*“Due to James's complicated school history, he has had limited school experience. He has not had a positive experience with academics, teachers or peers in a regular classroom setting.”*

I sensed the situation was dire at the school, but at home things were not going well either for James. I was also teaching at the same time and two of his older sisters were in my class at the neighbouring high school. It was late in November when I received a call at my home from his oldest sister, pleading for my help because she did not know who to call. James had left in an angry violent rage in their home when his father was not there. He told his sisters he hated school and he was leaving forever. This happened on a Friday night. The oldest sister's desperate call came at 10:30 p.m. the following Saturday night. James was missing. The family had waited as long as they could so as to not bother me but they were desperate. Their father had been out for hours



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looking for James at friends' homes and in local parks. James was 14 and barely knew his own address and phone number. He could not read the bus schedule and had no concept of time or distance. I suggested the family call the police and I would call them in the morning to see if he had turned up.

That night I did not sleep at all. I kept thinking the worst and my heart ached for the family. I tried hard to remain calm so as to not alarm my own children but the hours dragged and I found myself trying everything and anything to get to sleep. The next morning I learned that the police had found James hiding in some go-carts outside the city limits. The family was grateful for having him back. James' time away from home seemed to have been a catalyst for many more anxious nights for his family.

Shortly after that time, his behavior at school escalated to a point where emergency funding was allocated from the province to support him within the school. In the classroom, he was unwilling to do anything the teacher asked and was outwardly defiant to any adult. He used foul language frequently and was verbally abusive to staff as well as other students. He threatened physical violence to others if he did not get what he wanted. By the Christmas holidays the school had enough of his behavior and he was on extended suspensions regularly.

For the rest of that school year, James spent time at an alternate location in the school division so his academic and social needs were being met. Thinking back, I am not sure why I am so troubled by this story but it is definitely an experience I would not want to repeat. To begin with, I wonder if placing James in a regular middle school setting was appropriate. James had never been in school and he definitely did not know

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anything about the school system in Canada. Did we set him up for failure by placing him in large classes of 26-30 students, where one teacher taught without support and he would struggle to integrate? What could we have done instead to ensure that his transition into school was successful? He was 12 years old but developmentally he was behaving like a child in kindergarten out of sheer frustration. What could we have done to meet his developmental needs so as to build up his confidence and encourage the development of higher-order thinking skills that are required of a 14-year-old in our school system? What could I have done differently so the teachers felt more prepared to work with James within their classrooms? Were the classrooms even an appropriate setting for him? Had I not done enough work supporting the middle schools to work with these EAL learners?

It was a difficult year and many hours were spent discussing and planning for James for the following school year. Grade 9 should be a better year but I am sure much work needs to be done and James is not unique. There could be many others like him who may be arriving into our schools. I am not sure we are prepared.

## **Final Thoughts**

James' story speaks to me about the challenges teachers face when working with adolescent EAL learners who also carry with them behavioral concerns. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2008):

Students going through the period of adolescence face significant challenges. For ELLs with limited prior schooling, this is compounded by the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and environment. They face the typical issues of

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adolescence while developing their own sense of identity and self-confidence.

The rebelliousness of adolescence may even extend to coming to Canada since they may have no choice in the experience...The school plays a critical role in helping the student navigate new experiences and build self-esteem, perspective and positive outlook. (p. 12)

Despite James' lack of prior schooling, he was the typical rebellious teenager. However, his story led me to question the supports that were put in place to provide him with the best possible academic programming while paying attention to his behavioral needs. I can remember the frustration I felt as I tried to explain to teachers what daily work might look like for James. However, looking back, they did not have the experience or the training to do what was needed for James when he first entered school. Although James brought with him life experiences, he did not have any formal education. I wonder if the difficulties for the teachers may have stemmed from trying to meet his needs in the same setting as all other EAL learners with prior education. Did the system recognize that James needed specialized intensive programming with regards to literacy and numeracy? EAL teachers who work with students who come from backgrounds with prior education may identify several challenges with regards to programming. However, James' story is even more complex as there are several layers that need to be pulled back to inwardly examine the barriers that I feel teachers are faced with when working with students like James.

The system in which James' narrative occurs does not match the narrative of the bigger system, which is the school. Teachers were challenged by having to provide academic supports in a mainstream setting. They were also weighed down with the

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belligerence he was demonstrating on a daily basis. They were caught in the tension of having to meet curricular demands as well as providing a safe, engaging working environment for other learners while trying to program for James. I could easily empathize with how exhausting this was for the school.

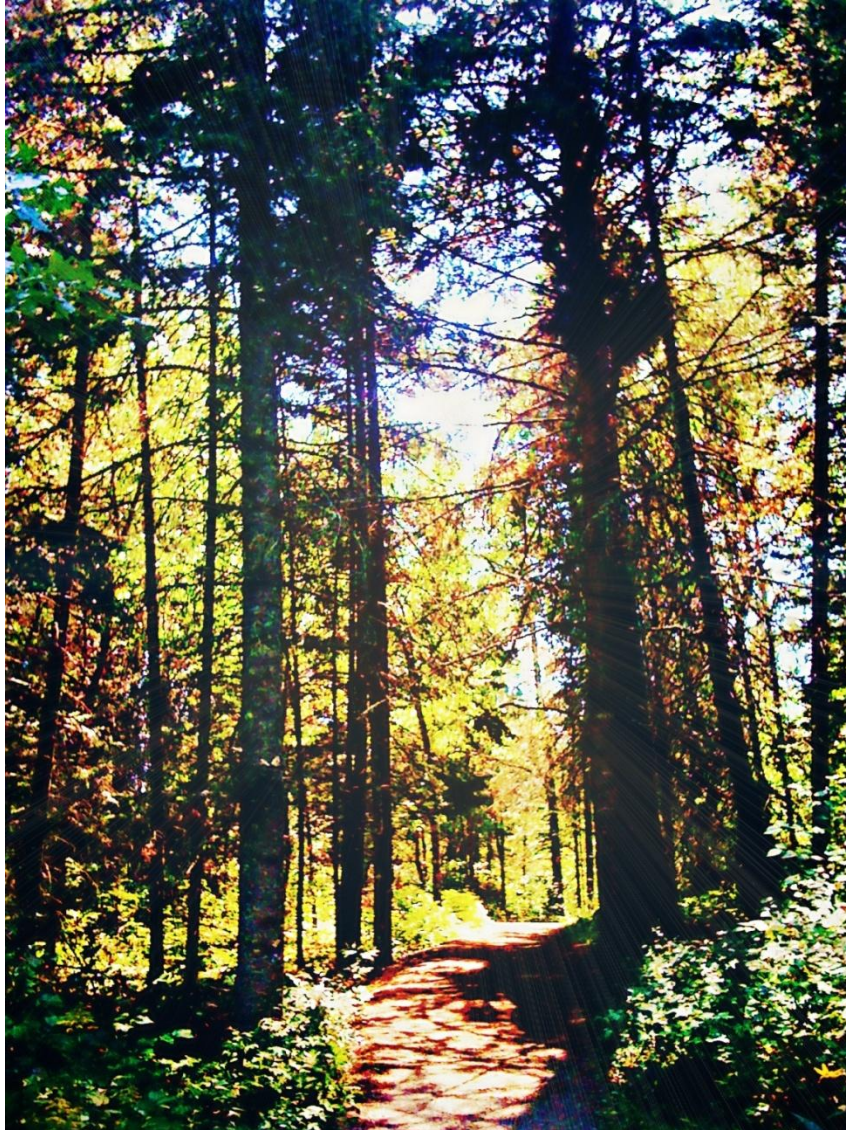
Looking back, I wonder if James' behaviors were a result of our failure to attend to his needs or a combination of personality, adolescence and a dissonance between two systems. It appears that James was not set up for success from the time he entered the Canadian school landscape. What have we learned from his story and what could I do differently to prepare schools for students who have the academic and behavioral needs that are similar to James? Would I tell them to integrate him into mainstream programming? Is this inclusive education? Would the intensive programming models described in the Manitoba Education (2010 draft) be what he needed?

The literature suggests that lack of policy with regards to the education of under-schooled children and youth will result in consequences for learners, teachers and the system (Crandall et al., 1998). With respect to James, perhaps much of the planning for him needed to be done ahead of time. This way, as a support teacher, I could have better prepared other teachers for living alongside James. I am taken back to Crandall et al.'s work (1998): "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum: For students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (p.727). James's story encapsulated for me the essence of this very statement.

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Inquiring into my experiences as an EAL teacher – and doing it in an autobiographical manner - has been a daunting task. It asked of me that I remember, combine, write, tell, rewrite, retell, interpret, and reinterpret events that brought forth many feelings and emotions. Throughout this inquiry the stories allowed me to be awakened to many of the rewards, challenges and barriers that I faced as a teacher. Although I did not attend to the specifics of the pleasures of teaching these students, I would not feel a sense of completion in the storytelling without acknowledging the joys I have experienced in my work. The narratives shared between teacher and students have enriched my life in ways that are practically inexplicable. These narratives allowed me to create my texts and as a result, I have been able to learn and grow through the varied experiences that have made my teaching landscape unique and rewarding. I have often told family and friends it is the stories lived both in and out of school with the students that make teaching EAL learners unique. From Mary to James, the richness of the lived experiences has given me a means to delve into my inquiry. Without the students who came in and out of my life, their laughs, their tears, their anxieties, their resiliency and their hopes, none of this would have been possible.

**Chapter Five: Promising Pathways<sup>11 12</sup>**



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<sup>11</sup> Bemidji State Park, Bemidji, Minnesota, August 20, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> The title of “Promising Pathways” was inspired from the document set out by Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth in 2009.

### **Inquiring into My Journey as an EAL Learner and Teacher**

*It is September 2011. This marks the start of my eighteenth year of teaching and I begin my school year with great anticipation. This year is different. I do not have a classroom to get ready, I do not have materials to prepare and I do not have the pressures of getting things ready for my students. Instead, I come to my office to prepare meetings with schools that I will support. I also begin preparing professional development sessions and I spend a great deal of my time continuing my mentorship with the new teacher at the Literacy, Academics and Language class in the high school where I used to work. I look ahead in my calendar and I see I have something special to look forward to this year. I have been invited to the International Metropolis Conference as part of a panel with one of my professors. Ironically, the conference takes place in the Azores and the topic is “Migration Futures: Perspectives on Global Changes”. (Journal entry, September 8, 2011)*

**Path to the Past<sup>13</sup>**



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<sup>13</sup> Faja de Cima, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 13, 2011.



**Returning to my roots: Sandra's story, part 1**

*I have mixed feelings as I return home from a week in the Azores. I am anxious to get back to my family but I am also sad to be leaving this paradise. I am feeling overwhelmed as I think back to the week of learning, my presentation and coming full circle with my Azorean-Canadian identity. I see the story unfolding in front of me and the past, present and future all intertwined together. The Azores had so many picturesque and winding paths. I wonder how Mother Nature can create so many beautiful spaces. I came to the Azores and found myself surrounded by people who understand the work I do. I also found myself surrounded by its ocean waters and was touched by how its geographical beauty engulfed me in my heritage, history and identity. I cannot wait to get home to tell my family about what I learned, my visits with family and one experience in particular at an antique shop. (Journal entry, September 17, 2011)*

I look out the airplane window as I leave the homeland of my parents. The tears begin to flow as I feel the wheels come off the ground. I look down as long as I can and as hard as I can. I try to memorize all the details of the magnificence before me. I think about how I will use this experience in my writing and I am reminded of the last day I had on the island of Sao Miguel. It was the evening after the conference ended and I had decided to go down to the waterfront to grab something to eat and enjoy the water. I haphazardly walked down the beautiful cobble-stoned street and glanced at a sign on a shop that indicated antiques were sold there. I entered the shop without much thinking and before I could even enjoy the antiques there, I found myself asking the girl behind the counter if she sold old books. I told her I was looking for books that were about 60 years old and were used as readers for children during the Salazar's Socialist Regime.

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She said those types of books were a rarity as many were burned as part of the revolution for democracy in 1974. She then paused and asked me to follow her to another building. She said she had a small leather case that may have some old books in it but it may have been sold. I followed her eagerly down the winding road into another warehouse where she pulled out a gently used case. As she opened it, I could feel my anxiety. I hoped desperately she would find the books I was looking for. Although I had not planned on stopping in the shop, it was impulse that took me in. Yet again, it was a serendipitous occasion that led me to what I consider one of the most significant moments in my life. Inside the case were four books. These were the books from which my parents had learned to read. These were the books they often talked about that had stories about character, religion and politics. I had found them after they somehow had survived the political revolution. Now they were in my very hands. I began to shake as I held and smelled the history within that small case. The young lady at the counter was taken aback by my emotion and offered to call her boss so we could find out the price. After much negotiation, I purchased the case of books to bring home to Canada and share with my parents.

The finding of these treasured little books means so much to me in so many ways. They completed my journey at the conference as I came to realize the strength of the Azorean Diaspora in Winnipeg. The books are symbolic for the history that I shared with my parents. I wonder if this is perhaps what has created in me the ability to empathize so much with EAL learners.

I began my path along the streets of Ponta Delgada as a participant and workshop co-presenter at the International Metropolis Conference, and left with a piece of history in

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my hands that reminded me of how privileged I am to have been born in Canada. The actual serendipitous finding of the books and the books themselves were significant for my work today on several levels. To put things into perspective chronologically, the four readers I found in that antique shop were over 60 years old. They are contained in a small leather case meant to protect them and be used as a carrying case to and from school. In this instance, the vendor had informed me this case had been brought into the shop by a teacher who no longer wanted the items. From a teacher's lens, they are a unique piece of history that outlasted political turmoil and deliberate destruction. In my head, if I personified them, they became like resilient students who had overcome great adversity throughout their experiences. As well, the books brought back the blatant reminder that not so long ago in my own family, my mother was an EAL learner with interrupted schooling. Inside each of the four readers is the name of a child who, like my mother, was only required or only had the opportunity to go to school to approximately the fourth grade (as calculated in our Canadian education system). The condition of the entire set is also very important and spoke a great deal about the value placed on these books. I was touched by the exquisite condition of the pages and the care that must have gone into transporting them back and forth from school. This reminded me so much of the stories I had heard from my students about not having adequate supplies for their schooling, and how simple things such as paper and pens were cherished items.

Inside the books, I can see faint scribbles. These are the marks of a child learning to read. I see them throughout the four weathered readers as I skim through the titles of the reading selection. I notice the selections are a mixture of popular folk tales, religious text, political text, and stories and poems meant to teach values. My parents learned to

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read from these books in a time where they did not have freedom. Although they were given the right to read, it was limited due to social conditions and societal demands. For my mother, this was particularly true as there was no expectation or desire for a young girl to continue in school beyond age 12. This is not so different than the students with whom I have worked. Finding these books was both personally and professionally emotional. The unspoken narrative within each one of the tiny readers held so much information. I stumbled upon them in an insignificant manner only to realize how important they really are to me and my job.

Today I am in a different space professionally. I have received one of the most powerful experiences that one could ever have by going back to my heritage. I went to the conference as part of my professional experience and left with much emotion and a greater appreciation for what many migrants experience as they move to new lands. I know I can never fully understand what it is to be displaced, forced to move or become an immigrant unless the experience is thrust upon me personally but to date attending the International Metropolis Conference was one of those life-changing experiences that will be embedded in my heart and mind forever.

**Small Steps on a Wide Path<sup>14</sup>**



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<sup>14</sup> Caldeira Velha, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 10, 2011

## **My journey as an EAL learner: Sandra's story, part 2**

If we can learn how people put their narratives together when they tell stories from life, considering as well how they might have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal. (Bruner, 2004, p. 709)

I am cheering for Canada during the final gold medal match of the men's Olympic hockey game. I am proud to be part of this outstanding country, and joke with my mother on the phone that she should be wearing red and white clothing as she cheers too on this bright Sunday afternoon, knowing perfectly well she shares a different view of Canadian identity than I. She is an immigrant woman who is grateful to be living in this land of never-ending opportunities but still holds on to her heritage as an Azorean-Portuguese Canadian with fierce pride. She immigrated to Winnipeg in 1968 with her mother and sister, leaving the love of her life behind on the small island of Sao Miguel due to a political revolution that threatened to break the spirit of all the young people. Fortunately, just two years later, my father was able to join her and the rest is their personal history.

I was born in Winnipeg but could never identify myself as a Canadian until my late 20s. If you asked me about my heritage I would quickly respond Portuguese. I remember feeling slightly saddened when I would have to explain I was born here but did not speak the English language fluently until about the age of eight. Now that I am working in an EAL setting and have a clearer vision of who I am and journeyed through language acquisition in both English and French, I can say I am comfortable with living in two heritages, three languages and my passage from immigrant's daughter to EAL teacher is what makes me unique. I believe it is my bi-cultural experience that allows me

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to function in two distinct cultural groups (Menard-Warwick, 2008) and it also helps me to become a more intercultural individual and teacher. Menard-Warwick (2008) cites Byram (1997) and Wesche (2004) when she refers to interculturality as “awareness and a respect of difference, as well as the socio-affective capacity to see oneself through the eyes of others” (p. 619). This ability allows me to work effectively in a classroom full of students who have had diverse experiences. Although I can never claim to know what they have seen, smelled, heard or touched, I can say I can empathize with some of their experiences.

I have always been drawn to language, perhaps due to my memories of being an EAL language learner in my own right. Even though I was born in Canada, I grew up in a central Winnipeg neighbourhood that was home to many newcomers at that time. There was no need to speak another language as both adults and children all around me shared my first language. I had moved from my first school in the core of the city that recognized ESL learners. I am not sure if they had programmed for me but when I switched schools two years later, I was told I was behind significantly in my reading and it would take an intensive amount of work to get caught up. I remember sitting on my living room couch doing home-reading with my mother who could barely read at a level higher than a third grader in her first language. The pages of the withered *Mr. Mugs* book were full of beautiful little drawings and I can remember loving those pictures. But I can also remember crying on my mother’s lap as she sat with me with tears in her eyes, frustrated that she could not help me more. I read the words aloud to her and even at that time I tried to be meticulous about the pronunciation. Even if I was unsure about a word,

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I felt like I was teaching my mother too and so everything I said orally, even if it was invented, would have to sound as if I knew what I was doing.

As a result of my struggles in the early years of my education I believe I am resilient. Although my trauma could not be considered serious, I was scarred by feelings of inadequacy from an early age and I believe it is because of these scars that my personality has been shaped to be someone with a great deal of intrinsic motivation. I am motivated to do things for myself, for my family, for my friends and of course for my students. This includes the commitment to do my best to pay closer attention to the linguistic, academic and socio-emotional needs of these students as a teacher in Manitoba. It is not surprising I came to education with a desire to help students and I knew the “regular” classroom would not be the focus for my career. As a result, I turned to special education and working in the area of Resource in the Student Services Department. That is where my experiences with EAL learners began to shape my world and speak to me in ways I could never realize.

*I am watching television and remembering our Canadian military as we honour our veterans and current service men and women. I am emotional as I think back to the comment a student made to me when he arrived from Afghanistan He said if it were not for the Canadian soldiers he would have died along with his father who was killed in a bombing. These were powerful words that left a lasting impression in my brain and heart. It seems like every year at this time I think of this student's words and I tend to reflect on what this day really means for all Canadians, including my EAL students.*



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*A year ago today, I wrote about my Remembrance Day experience as I reflected on my first experiences with EAL students. Today I received a phone call just after 11:11 a.m. It was my mom. She reminded me that today was a special day for her too. On November 11 she marks the anniversary of her arrival in Canada. I cannot believe how things work out sometimes. I am struggling to get started with my next section of my thesis. I am looking to be inspired, grasping at something, anything to get me started. A simple phone call is enough to do the trick. Somehow I had forgotten this was her immigration anniversary date. I feel like my mother's story seems to parallel my experience of writing this thesis. I believe the uncovering of her lack of formal education, her immigration, resettlement and desire to make my future a better one is comparable to many of the stories I have heard and lived alongside. Today's date is auspicious for many. I feel lucky to be Canadian, to have the freedom to begin this narrative journey and to have been reminded by my mother that the day holds multiple layers of meaning for many Canadians. (Journal entry, November 11, 2011, Winnipeg)*

Reflecting on my own identity through this inquiry has given me insight as to how my own experiences as an EAL learner has shaped who I was as a teacher in the past, who I am currently and how it will help shape who I am in the future. As I reflect backwards to my early teaching career, it was my experience of learning another language in the early educational years that led to my interest in learning other languages. As a young child, I had the difficult task of learning to read as a bilingual language learner. I had limited experience in my own first language with regards to literacy and at the same time, my literacy was required to develop in English as outlined by the

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curricular demands. The struggles I had in the past with not being able to understand or “keep up” made me feel inadequate, sad, anxious and nervous. At that time in the early 1970s, many of my friends were coming from the same linguistic background. Their families also spoke and read to them in Portuguese and English was left to be taught in the schools. Socially the other children I was around were facing the same challenges as I. We all had a tough time in school and I can remember our parents discussing these challenges during Sunday visits at one another’s homes. The difference for me however was that I had moved from an inner-city school where teachers were familiar with English language learners, to a suburban school where I was one of two children in the entire grade that spoke another language other than English at home. Today I can laugh with my Hindi-speaking friend about our shared experiences in elementary school.

Having lived through all of this helped to shape me as a young French teacher. I entered university without having a French immersion background and took all my major courses in French. Perhaps it was naive at time but I chose to pursue an education degree learning another language. Back then, I never really thought about the actual language learning experience. I just went ahead, took the courses and knew deep down I would learn French somehow. As I think back, the experience of having learned another language so early on in my life shaped me positively. I did not question my ability to succeed in my courses. Although the path was rocky at some points, I was able to finish my Bachelor of Education with a major in Français and a minor in English. There was never any doubt that I would go into teaching with a language focus in mind.

Having had the experiences of learning a new language twice also created some false thinking on my part. Because I had been able to succeed in learning English and

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then French, I thought that if I could do it, everyone else should be able to do it too in the identical way. This was a dangerous attitude I carried into the classroom in my early career. I think back to the students I taught in the “Late French Immersion Program”. This was a program designed for students learning French at a later entry point (Grade 7) rather than in the first grade. My classroom and instruction did not reflect respectful attitudes towards the stories I was living alongside of my students. Their experiences, past academic histories and lives were as varied as those of the EAL students whom I taught. Some of these students learning French were also EAL learners and I did not even recognize that French would have been their third or fourth language. The difference was I did not attend to the stories they were telling between the lines. I was focused on surviving my first teaching experiences and entered into it with an arrogance that led to what now I can see as many tensions dealing with motivation and discipline. Looking back, I wish I had someone who would have helped me with those experiences and could have worked with me as a mentor. Perhaps I would not have presumed that all the students were the same, that they all came in with the same linguistic and social experiences, and their own narratives were not as important as the material I was teaching.

I can now see how my past language learning experiences also led to my development as a Basic French, Français, Sciences Naturelles and Language Arts teacher in the early 1990s. I acknowledge there was a natural relationship in moving from Portuguese to English to French as the languages are all related, making it easier for me to acquire them. This contributed to my early teaching experiences as my desire to learn a language was never impeded by the difficulties that others may face as they move from

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their primary languages to English. Even as a novice EAL teacher, I was aware of the Common Underlying Proficiency theory by Cummins (1980) that explained the ease with which I learned other languages. His theory maintains that the skills and abilities an EAL student has in one language will transfer to another language. Although I could not name this theory at the time, I was aware of it within my own learning and was able to bring elements of it into practice when I was working with students. I did not, however, consider how difficult it must have been for those students in my classes who spoke languages that were not linked linguistically to English. I presumed a language was a language and there would be no difference in the rate of acquisition. Looking back now, I realize through my own EAL experience I brought forward many biases and assumptions about language learning that were not necessarily accurate. Looking inward, I was young, ambitious and motivated to take on the challenge of teaching English to newcomers, even though I did not understand the complexity of the job. I knew this area of teaching was something I could relate to through my own experiences. Thinking back, the administration must have sensed my eagerness to take on this teaching assignment. I can recall many conversations with Student Services teams about how it must have felt to be a newcomer and have to learn English too. I suppose it was not because I was academically prepared to become an EAL teacher; I had become an EAL teacher by “default”. I spoke other languages, I exhibited the characteristics of a caring individual and I already had the resource background that could help me to work with these students. All these traits combined made me a good candidate to be the school’s EAL teacher. Added to this, I was keenly interested and the students were some of the finest people I had ever met in my life.

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A shift in thinking, philosophy and practice had to occur so I could reflect on how my own EAL experiences have influenced me today. As a support teacher for other EAL teachers, much thinking has been shaped by being awakened to both my own and my family's history as EAL learners and new immigrants.

Markers for Future Paths<sup>15</sup>



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<sup>15</sup>Faja de Cima, Sao Miguel, Azores, September 13, 2011

### **Becoming and being an EAL curriculum support teacher: Sandra's story, part 3**

When I began the journey into the *Narrative Inquiry in Educational Research* course in the fall of 2010, my personal life had taken on many changes. I was asked to take on a leadership role in the division by becoming the first curriculum support teacher for English as an Additional Language. I was thrilled with the proposition, but thinking back I was not prepared for the grief of letting go of so many people and things that were very important in my life. In order to create space for this new professional challenge, I had to let go of the notion that I was no longer seen as one of the teachers. "Letting go" of the perception that "I was no longer one of them", because I was not housed in one particular school and this factor caused me to question my decision to take the job. Letting go of many things that were comfortable such as predictable schedules, routine days, collegiality on a daily basis and most importantly, being around youth was part of what this new landscape asked of me. Teachers are creatures of habit. We work from bells, schedules, appointments and prep rooms. This was something I enjoyed very much. But the part that caused the greatest tension for me was the lack of relationships I was building on a daily basis with students. After 17 years of direct contact, this was a challenge. I was grieving and somehow I knew I had to come to terms with my new identity, and yet I was excited at the prospects that lay ahead.

For me, this change was extremely difficult as I had always considered the concept of being a "team" a part of my career which was extremely valuable and rewarding. Now I would have to forge new relationships, foster old ones but mainly get used to the fact that if I did not seek out these people, very few were going to contact me for help. I still joke about seeing myself as the vacuum cleaner saleswoman going from

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door to door selling her wares. Except it is not vacuums I am selling (which in some ways creates the difficulty). It is my job to help teachers and schools build programming for EAL learners. How do I invite myself into a new school and offer what I have to share? I knew I had work to do but the distance I felt from colleagues with whom I had worked in the division for several years was evident. I had to draw on whatever resilience I had in a time of crisis (and I problematize this analogy because of the literal insignificance of my crises compared to those lived by my former students) so I could make sense of my new environment. This required making many shifts in my approach to relationships, what I thought about professional support should look like with regards to EAL, and finding a way to make what I was doing meaningful and relevant to myself as well as to others.

I found one of the best approaches to build trust with other staff is by sharing a personal story. Having the ability to go from school to school to build the personal connections with staff as they move along their lives is a difficult task. Yet there seems to always be a positive response when the personal connection can be made by storytelling. My own EAL journey has been one story I have been able to share with other teachers so they can hear from first-hand experience. Being able to say you know what it feels like to be an EAL learner is both frightening and empowering at the same time. Telling peers I have had the EAL experience always draws an interesting reaction. Some teachers are unsure of how this could be as I was born in Canada, while others make the instant connection to learners in their classes who may have the same linguistic experiences as me. I still feel very vulnerable as I share what I experienced as a young child with relative strangers. But by doing so, I am also allowing others to see that not every EAL learner comes from the same background and you really have to know your students so



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assumptions are not made about their language needs or cultural experiences. This is where being able to share something so private becomes empowering as a support to other staff. Added to this, sharing my own EAL journey is an opportunity for others to come forward and share their own experiences around language learning, whether it is personal or about someone in their family.

I look through the lens of my own EAL experience to help me navigate through this inquiry into the future. It is through this lens I am able to see that the retelling of my own story as an inquirer of my own experiences has awakened me to some emerging threads in the stories I shared. I am able to draw on connections I have lived through the school system and my family to reflect into my inquiry and seeing how my own experiences will shape me as a teacher in the future.

It was not until I was able to reflect on my own experiences and attitudes that I was able to grasp the differences in EAL learners. I based all my assumptions about language learning and the immigrant experience on what I had lived. Looking backwards, I can now see that there are many differences in the definition of EAL learners. I can also see the vast differences in the needs each learner may have. Some may have supportive families and very little education, while others may have no family with a very solid educational background. After reflecting on my own experiences, I try to reinforce the idea with other teachers that all students are individuals with complex histories when they arrive in our schools.

My own EAL journey becomes more and more distant as the years go by but with each new experience I had with a new student, I found myself always coming back to my

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own story. Perhaps it is human nature to want to relate to our students to have a springboard for future connections. Or, perhaps it is the desire to make the experiences better for those students so they do not experience more difficulties than those already inherent in the newcomer experience. Reflecting back at different times in my life always brings up how I could have done things better for many of my students.

“Narrative inquiry is, as always, multilayered and many stranded” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. xvii). I have narrated my own experiences of being and becoming an EAL Curriculum Support Teacher with the intent of using my inquiry to help myself and to help others. It is with a greater understanding that this narrative inquiry process, the events in my life will keep shifting and so will my responses to these events. As I move forward, I have been given a way to “think in a more detailed and informative way” (p. 3) about the continuity of my life and the lives of those who have journeyed with me.

**Chapter Six: Living with/in Tensions along the Pathway: 16**



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<sup>16</sup> Barreirinhas, Brazil, August, 2010

## **My Hope as an EAL Professional**

### **Awakenings in the Inquiry**

Through the inquiry into the stories in chapters four and five, I was able to unravel several narrative threads which occurred through awakenings. I explore these narrative threads in the next section with the acknowledgement that these threads are significant to me as I inquired into my past. I am aware of the shift in temporality and that much has shifted since I have begun this inquiry.

### **Acknowledging the tensions between the personal and the systemic challenges and barriers.**

One of the most apparent narrative threads throughout this inquiry is the tensions that occur between systems. In order to address the needs of both teachers and students, it is important that I acknowledge the tensions that can occur within these two areas. Through my inquiry I have categorized the systems into two sections: the personal system and the educational system. Based on Stewart's (2010) definition of the micro-system, the personal system I have defined includes my personal beliefs, wants, and actions as well as those around me who become part of my own "micro system" (p. 17), like family, friends and colleagues. The system in contrast is the educational system which includes students, teachers, policymakers, social agencies and community members who all work within a larger framework.

The process of inquiring into my own experiences has awakened me to the intertwining that has occurred between my life and the lives of the students with whom I have worked. This intertwining has led to many journeys where pathways have crossed

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both personal and professional boundaries. At times, the experiences I lived alongside the students blended into the experiences I was living at home as a mother and wife. I think back to the story of Edward. The amount of time I spent outside of school trying to support this family had a direct impact on my own family. They were concerned about Edward but they also became extremely concerned about me as I became so emotionally invested in what was happening. I could no longer separate the events of the school day with the events of my life. This became extremely stressful for all around me as the eviction day got closer and closer.

Reflecting on this story, I learned that Edward's life had overlapped into my life. The two systems could not be separated. Once I began working with EAL refugee students, I realized I no longer led an insular life. I cared deeply about my students, and until Edward's story, I felt my frustrations were partially a result of working in a system that was not supportive. I felt alone in what I was doing. Until I saw how others banded together to help me help Edward, a great deal of energy was spent on defending my role, convincing others in the system they needed to support the students, and politically positioning myself within the educational system so I had the power to help liberate the students (Stewart, 2010, p. 184).

As the lives of the students became intertwined with my own, I came to understand I could no longer predict when our paths would cross again in the future. Through my inquiry into Jessica's story I learned that the relationships built between EAL teachers and students are perhaps some of the strongest bonds made in education. This may be due to the deep trust required between teacher and student, and the deeper commitment EAL teachers make when they take on non-academic roles. When Jessica

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came back to my office, I did not anticipate she was going to tell me such a powerful story about her history. I was surprised by her return and the vulnerability she showed as she shared her past and present trauma. Through my inquiry I was awakened to the possibility I would always have a relationship with Jessica and her family. While the relationship I have with her may not always be active, our shared experience of her profound storytelling allowed me to become more than just a teacher. From a personal point of view, I was honoured that she allowed and entrusted me to hear her secret story. However, this knowledge caused me to feel extremely vulnerable as I continued to have a professional relationship with her siblings within the educational context. I saw how familial resilience was “a complex network of factors which influence how well refugee parents are able to envisage their families’ futures, and which determine their capacity to support their children in achieving their ambitions” (Stewart, 2010, p. 678) through the determination of her mother. Yet I was caught again between two systems. Personally I wanted to foster the friendship I had created with Jessica, and yet I felt I could not do this because her mother and siblings were still part of our school district.

James’ story was also crucial to my awakening to the dissonance that occurs between the personal and the educational system. James’ story was unique as it was an experience I had with a student who came from a situation where no prior formal education existed. His life experience did not permit him to ever attend school. However, upon arrival in Canada, he was placed in a setting where few supports were available to him. As a support teacher, I was frustrated with the possibility that James might never reach his potential because as a system we had failed to provide him with what he needed. As I inquired into my lived experience with James, I could see how supporting

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schools to understand the needs of Literacy, Academics and Language (LAL) students who are in the very first stages of entering a formal education system became increasingly difficult. I often questioned how schools were supposed to provide intensive reading, writing and numeracy instruction at emergent levels while trying to cope with the adolescent and challenging behavior such as James'.

Looking back, I can see how teachers charged with planning for his academic success felt defeated and confused as to how to best meet his needs. Added to this, James exhibited psycho-social issues through his defiant and dangerous behavior. Before any of the academics could be addressed, the school had to provide support to James for his psychological problems that came “as a result of having been transplanted from the familiar people, language, and surroundings in their home country to a new environment and a new language” (DeCapua , Smathers, and Lixing, 2009, p. 33). Through my inquiry into James' story I was awakened to the need to attend to the lives of the student from a holistic approach. Although the educational system does attend to the needs of student by providing differentiated instruction, adaptations, behavior intervention plans, individualized education plans and EAL education plans, not much is in place to support the “social and affective needs related to language learning and cultural adjustment” (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 32). Added to this is the challenge of navigating through these needs and" then realizing the students may require more profound support for issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by the ravages of war. “Symptoms of PTSD usually develop when an individual realizes that he or she is in a safe environment and can reflect on the traumatic events experienced” (Arroyo & Eth, 1996 as cited in DeCapua, 2009, p. 33). The tension of knowing the student was living through these

difficulties contrasted with the limited understanding and supports available to teachers and made this experience extremely challenging.

### **Sharing knowledge with teachers.**

Throughout my inquiry, I learned I needed support to gain more knowledge about war-affected students so as to better support them and their teachers. I also realized I needed to create space in my professional landscape to attend to the needs of other teachers who may be feeling the same challenges. One direct way is to listen to what other teachers have to say about their experiences so we can make our interpretations about what is happening in our professional landscapes. By having the EAL teacher experience documented in literature, we would have important tools to “become more prepared and knowledgeable about the experiences and needs of refugee students to more adequately address their learning needs” (Stewart, 2010. p. 7).

Another way I will move ahead with learning more and sharing my knowledge is by sharing resources and materials that are focused on this segment of the EAL population. As a new teacher to EAL or an experienced teacher looking to improve what I am doing to support refugee students, I would have benefited from resources such as *Life After War: A Healing Process for Refugee and War Affected Children Draft* (Manitoba Education, 2011). In retrospect, having such a comprehensive tool to prepare for the challenges I would face would have been extremely helpful. The document is beautifully designed to attend to the needs of the teacher working with refugee EAL learners. The first component contains information concerning refugee and war-affected



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children and how these issues fit into a social and political context (p. 5). It provides suggestions for strengthening resiliency within the schools through a specific look at the difference between factors supporting boys' success and those supporting girls' success. One of the most valuable sections is on support educators who work with refugee students and families. The document discusses common reactions among those working with refugees, implications for practice, burnout, dealing with emotional reactions and traumatic events, coping with stress and debriefing. Having this piece of literature is tremendously valuable as I seek to create dialogue amongst teachers working in schools with refugee students. The impact of this type of literature could be far-reaching as teachers look to be supported pedagogically, theoretically and emotionally to deal with the heaviness that can occur while working with refugee students.

### **Creating space for the stories.**

Another thread that became evident was the need to attend to the stories of EAL teachers who are working with refugee students. Many teachers are currently in this situation and working in isolation. As in the story of Mary, the teachers are not aware of what others are doing to help make the transition easier for the new students. Throughout my review of the literature, very little is written with respect to the experiences of EAL teachers working with refugees, especially refugees with interruptions to their education. This speaks the need to listen to what other teachers are saying and the experiences they are living alongside of their students.

Reflecting on my own identity as an EAL learner allowed me to make meaning of how I could become more empathetic and attentive to the needs of this group of learners.

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Looking back into my own journey, the process of becoming aware that I was in fact an EAL learner with my mother also being an LAL learner was extremely powerful. In order to move ahead to my experiences as a teacher, I had to first move backwards and look at myself to see how the stories I lived impacted who I am today and what I will do in the future. When I unpacked the story about my mother and the readers I found in the Azores, I was awakened to the history that was not so distant in my past. I was able to relate to the challenges students were facing in our schools based on what my mother had experienced in her past. It was clear that because my parents did not speak English, I too would not speak English when I entered school. This became a barrier for my family and now as I reflect on the needs of the students, I can relate to the challenges their parents face. Stewart (2010) relays the message with regards to refugee parents and students. “Language and literacy issues were a challenge for both the students and the parents. The language was a barrier for parents to become more involved with their child’s education” (p. 83). I think back to my mother crying along me and realize how difficult it must have been for her and others like her coming from her own lived experiences as an LAL learner.

I was also able to see that just because I was motivated to learn another language later in my education, this was something unique to me and not all EAL learners are the same. I learned that the needs of EAL learners are extremely diverse and the context from which they are coming, the motivation for their learning, their resilience, hopes and educational histories are all factors in acquiring another language. Inquiring into my own past awakened me to the diversity of learners who are coming into the school system and how I can help teachers see how diverse EAL learners can be.

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Writing about the EAL teacher experience would help teachers who have worked in the field for many years to reflect on their own stories and inquire into how they may improve their teaching. This inquiry may attend to the feelings of isolation that can occur when each school and school division has the autonomy to deal with refugee students. For teachers entering the EAL field, the space created to hear teachers' voices in the literature will allow them to be more informed of this particular group of EAL learners. Looking inwardly, being given the opportunity to write narratively about my own EAL experience as both teacher and student, I have been able to understand myself and others through my own interpretations. I think back to Mary and realize if I had been prepared for an appropriate intake, I would not have caused her to relive the trauma she experienced in my office. This issue of ill-preparedness surfaced during her arrival but lingered on for many years as other students like Mary continued to come to Manitoba. "School leaders and educators need to learn about the issues related to war-affected children so that they are able to understand how they might best meet the needs of these students" (Stewart, 2010, p. 7).

As I navigated through the stories it also became apparent that by attending to the voice of the EAL teacher within myself, I could become more awakened to the worries I had and the things that I could have done differently. By inquiring into my experience I could take a deeper look at what decisions I was making at that point in time and what social context led to these decisions.

Thinking back, I am awakened to the possibility that many of the decisions I made to get involved in the lives of students were dependent on various contexts and factors around me. It is the story of John that speaks to me most about the need to hear of

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how other teachers in the field are dealing with the same challenges and making meaning from what they have experienced. John's story illustrated the trust that is needed between teacher and student and the challenges that can arise when this trust is built. Although I wanted to help John with being able to deal with the turmoil he was living, inevitable tensions were created when he disclosed to me what he did. These tensions became evident between him and me as we moved through our daily routines, as I had to be the advocate for him in an educational system that did not understand why he did what he did. Another tension that was created was in accepting the fact that I would never know the absolute truth about the events that unfolded in John's story. Certainty was no longer my goal (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). My inquiry allowed me to come to closure about this incident as I learned to let go of the desire to know exactly what had happened. The inquiry allowed me to see that John's story was his at that point in time. It was how he interpreted it and I had to make meaning of the events within the personal and professional context I was living. I was able to see John's lived experience through a narrative lens which gave me a way to look forward to the future as I worked with other students like John.

John trusted me enough as an adult to share personal information about himself and his life experiences (Stewart, 2010). At that time, I was at a loss to respond to his disclosure. I wanted to make things better for him but was compelled and obligated to tell the authorities what I knew. I was caught between two systems. "The struggle to deal with the information and to help others understand the issues became a major factor that contributed to frustration, anger and disappointment" (Stewart, 2010, p. 183).

**Accepting that there will be a blur in the definition of teacher.**

Perhaps the greatest awakening through my inquiry into the stories was the realization that the role of EAL teacher could no longer be defined through contractual definitions or teacher union policy. As I navigated through each of the stories, the most poignant narrative thread was that “teacher” was not a role I could define for other new or experienced teachers entering the field. Within all of the stories, being an EAL teacher implied also taking on the role of social worker, therapist, advocate, community liaison, interpreter, friend and parent. Although I cherished the experiences lived alongside of my students, at times these added roles became extremely overwhelming. Unlike any other teaching job, the demands of being an EAL teacher to refugee students far exceeded the demands I experienced as a French immersion teacher in the content-area classroom. At times, the stress was unbearable which led to many anxiety-filled sleepless nights. The stories illustrate how deep connections can be both rewarding and detrimental to teachers who work in this field. I am not sure the risks I took at times outweighed the support I provided to both students and teachers. Had I exceeded the limitations and boundaries that my profession set forth for me when I entered this career? Would I advise other teachers to be as involved with their students? I was awakened to the possibility that I needed to attend to the disparity between what was expected of a teacher and what was actually happening in my lived experiences.

Over the last five years much has changed in the teaching landscapes for Manitoba teachers. Much progress has been made for both teachers and student in the area of EAL and particularly around understanding the needs of refugee learners. I have been privileged to participate in course development teams, teacher advisories and LAL

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teacher network meetings which have facilitated so much of my personal growth.

Without the connections that I have made with colleagues, connections that I have made to more current literature and awakenings to different perspectives with regards to supporting refugee students, none of this inquiry would have been possible. I have relied heavily on the support of the brilliant people around me who have dedicated their lives to the whole of the refugee child. From them, I have learned that I am not alone and that together we can take small steps to providing supports for these students in a larger educational landscape than the classroom. This is a work in progress in Manitoba and it will continue to be a process. I have learned that although this process may take time, the process itself is just as important as the product. There have been days in my career that have caused me to question my choice to move into this direction as part of my teaching journey. However, my life as a teacher is full of joy and hope. If I had to go back and do it all over again, I know that I would follow the same path to where I am today. Not many people can say that they love their job day after day and I am proud of that.

### **Narrative Inquiry, Hopefulness and the Path to the Future**

Hope has been defined as “the ability to envision a future in which one is willing to participate” (Jevne, 2005 as cited by Li and Larsen, 2011, p. 5). In my current teaching landscape I am hopeful for a better learning environment for students. I am also hopeful that teachers will have new spaces in which they will be able to attend to the stories that unfold within their lives. I am willing to participate in this future and to offer the insights gained through my inquiry into my lived experiences.

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Narrative inquiry has become a natural extension of my relationship with self and others. I used my inquiry as a guiding principle to focus on my experiences and where they led me in the past and how they will lead me in the future (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 188). I stand back and see that the paths are many and the inquiry itself will always remain a part of my thinking, beliefs and way of making meaning of lived experiences. My hope is that others will take on the challenge of inquiring and realize that through inquiry they have the power to shape and reshape their personal and professional landscapes.

As I moved through the stories within the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place, I was able to reflect on how I might address these challenges and barriers at this time and in this space. Many wonderings still exist as I read, re-read and re-interpret these stories. However, the fundamental feeling left behind is one of hope within both the personal and educational systems.

I am taken back to Sillito's (2009) words to end this journey. "I marvel at the audacity of hope. It is this audacious nature-the spirited, daring, boldness- of hope that creates surprising outcome...I stand in awe before that hope that I witness daily in the struggles of immigrant learners I teach...I am moved, inspired and propelled by the hope that orients my spirit. We live storied lives and my life has been storied by hope" (p. 183). It is with this hopefulness that I begin a new journey along new paths.

**Epilogue**

**Found Poem**, December 9, 2011 from the hope literature of Li and Larsen, 2011 and Sillito, 2009 cited in this work.

**Pathways to hopefulness...**

**Hope to envision a future**

**A better future**

**Support adjustment**

**Fueling choices**

**Influenced by my own life choices**

**Determined,**

**Supported,**

**Encouraged**

**Given the  
chance to tell  
my story**

**Audacious  
and daring**

**Hope creates surprising outcomes**

**Emancipatory**

**Redeeming salient what is important for me**

**Beyond listening**

**Being present to one another as whole persons**

**Hearing messages that  
come from beyond words**

**Will I  
participate?**



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