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Tales From Grades 1 Through 12: Understanding the Complex Web of Multiple Life Forces Located in Schools

This study is a qualitative autoethnographical narrative of my grades 1 through 12 experiences in a Catholic school system in Alberta. Autoethnographical research interprets a culture by producing highly personalized and revealing texts; it examines social phenomena holistically and underscores how social histories influence identity development. To this end, this study brings clarity and understanding to the complex web of multiple societal forces in life that are located in schools (e.g., educational policy, hegemonic masculinity and femininity, play and recreation, family history, family health problems, youth identity development, popular culture, care theory, socioeconomic status, extracurricular school clubs) and in making difficult decisions related to improving the ecology of schooling.

Cette étude est un récit qualitatif et autoethnographique de mes expériences au sein du système scolaire catholique en Alberta, de la 1^{re} à la 12^e année. La recherche autoethnographique interprète une culture en produisant des textes très personnels et révélateurs. Elle examine les phénomènes sociaux globalement et souligne l'influence de l'histoire sociale sur le développement identitaire. À cette fin, l'étude jette de la lumière sur un réseau complexe de forces sociales qui se retrouvent dans les écoles (p. ex., la politique éducative, la masculinité et la féminité hégémoniques, le jeu et les activités récréatives, les antécédents familiaux, les problèmes de santé familiaux, le développement de l'identité chez les jeunes, la culture populaire, la théorie en matière de soins, le statut socioéconomique, les clubs extrascolaires) et sur la prise de décisions difficiles portant sur l'amélioration de l'écologie de l'éducation.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the names of all schools and people have been changed. However, all the events in this narrative are as accurate as my memory serves me. Approximately four years ago I visited my first school, Larry Elementary School (LES), a small Catholic school located in Alberta. As soon as I entered the front doors, I smelled a whiff that I recognized instantly and had not smelled for 20 years: I cannot really describe it other than it was the smell of LES, a type of dusty yet woody aroma. This event ignited my imagination and took me on a personal journey centered on understanding my grades 1 through 12 experiences. However, before telling my personal narrative, I explain the mode of research I use to tell my story.

Autoethnography

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(Dieser, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Sparkes, 2002). Autoethnographical research identifies the multiple forces that develop relations between self and society (e.g., educational policy, family history, popular culture, socioeconomic status) and permits the incursion of value and evaluation into the research storytelling process. Further, autoethnographical research can bring clarity to the body of knowledge and highlight how academic concepts function in professional settings and real-world experiences. A well-constructed autoethnographical story should develop emotional involvement, which moves the reader to deal with similar moral, ethical, and complex issues by seeing and managing the reader's events in their settings and lives (Ellis & Bochner; Sardin, 2004). Autoethnographical research has been used in many academic settings such as gaining insights into female high-performance sport (Tsang, 2000), understanding the lives of Jewish Holocaust survivors (Carney, 2004), explaining research methodologies (Ellis, 2004), developing public policy (Kaplan, 1993), bringing clarity to cross-cultural issues in treatment facilities (Dieser, 2002), underscoring the political and social injustices in medical and pharmaceutical research (Healy, 2004), and learning about the masked aspects of educational settings (Boostrom, 1994; Edmundson, 2002).

The delayed autoethnographical study that I present is told with two simultaneous voices: my childhood voice and my contemporary academic voice. Further, this autoethnographical study is purposely fragmented to underscore that my being has multiple subjectivities that shift and change in varied contexts and at varied times during the story (Butler, 1990).

Larry Elementary School (LES): Grades 1-4

Going back to the day I visited LES, I realized that most of my positive memories of LES were associated with play and recreational experiences. Although play, recreation, and leisure differ (Edginton, DeGraaf, Dieser, & Edginton, 2006), I use these terms interchangeably. The most powerful memory was of the Fiery Fours, an LES intramural recreation group that focused on a collaborative process to prepare for track-and-field day. Approximately a month before track-and-field day we met daily. Each team had youth leaders, older students who mentored younger students, and teacher mentors. I still remember constructing our fighting song (although parts of the song were in place, students could still construct it) and how enjoyable it was to see one of my favorite teachers Sister Mary Ann pound the tables and stamp her feet as she sang loudly:

Shut the windows.
Lock the doors.
Hear the cry of the Fiery Fours.
Hear the pounding of our feet
Around the field and down the street.
Here we go, it's time to roar.
The Fiery Fours will win once more.
Go-o-o-o-o-o Fours!!

As we walked to the gym, outside to practice, or on track day, we would chant loudly, "We are the Fiery Fours" again and again. And seeing our teachers cheer and act crazy was so exciting!

Play and recreation experiences provide multiple positive youth development outcomes (Caldwell, 2005; Edginton et al., 2006), and the intramural recreation at LES clearly provided me with a sense of belonging, a personal identity, and physical and cognitive skill development. I was part of a team and was appreciated and validated by team members, captains, and teachers. Our fighting song was so different from classroom behavior; we could be loud and boisterous. I loved LES! In particular, the combined aspects of play in a caring environment developed my many positive experiences at LES. In many ways the teachers were applying care theory (Noddings, 2003), and the play-care nexus seemed to be integrated during recess and physical activities such as the intramural recreation program. Teachers at LES demonstrated what Noddings has advocated: they showed and modeled care and kindness and treated students as valued companions (rather than character education, which gives lectures on kindness).

Simply stated, the LES intramural recreation program was based on care theory. In the Fiery-Four culture and in other intramural and free-time programs (e.g., the school Christmas play for the community), I could act in fantasy and use my imagination. For example, I vividly remember pretending that the Fiery Fours were involved in a medieval tournament and I was a knight. Although this may seem somewhat insignificant, the development of a fantasy life through play is not a trivial matter. Numerous developmental experts have underscored how fantasy, daydreaming, play, and intrinsic activities are important for good mental health (Michaelis, 1991; Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonijs-Pasternak, & Ponte, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1974). Further, play and childhood fantasy are related to the development of creativity. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1996), who interviewed just under 100 creative thinkers and many Nobel prizewinning scientists (e.g., Jonas Salk, Linus Pauling, Benjamin Spock, Rosalyn Yalow, Eva Zeisel), found that creative thinkers alternated between imagination, fantasy, and playfulness, but were rooted in reality, whereas "the rest of society often views these new ideas as fantasies without relevance to current reality" (p. 63).

Beyond the Fiery-Four culture and my involvement in intramural recreation, LES allowed students a good amount of autonomy during free time to pursue activities that were intrinsically meaningful. We had two recesses and a long lunch break (I am going from memory, but I think the lunch break was 60 minutes and the recesses 20-25 minutes). Caring teachers supported students and made sure that free-time activities were safe. For example, during recess teachers would play outdoor floor hockey or be active spectators with students in the outdoor concrete play areas. Mr. Kerry, our kind janitor, would go to great lengths to shovel the hockey play areas when snow was on the ground. In fact LES allowed students to bring their own hockey sticks and provided a place where they could be stored. Further, teachers would play softball, soccer, hopscotch, tetherball, marbles, and many other games with students and made sure that no bullying occurred during recess. Once we even had great snowball fights with teachers! LES was a wonderful place because the school balanced external-oriented academics (learning math to get a star placed on an irrelevant poster paper) with free-time experiences that were rich in play, coupled with caring teachers.

As I think back to LES, it seems that all was good at this Catholic school—like the Garden of Eden. As an academic I know that there must have been childhood experiences that were troubling and problematic, but little comes to mind. For example, I remember one case where one of my front teeth was knocked out by a hockey stick in grade 4 during recess and I was rushed to the dentist. However, I remember the positive aspect of being popular in school because my tooth was knocked out: it paralleled experiences of real hockey players. I showed off my lost tooth like a trophy. Similarly, I remember my grade 4 homeroom teacher (Mrs. Paul) becoming upset with me and slapping me across the cheek hard enough that I fell off of a stool. I escaped school during the next recess and rode my bike home to tell my mother about the incident. When I arrived, my mother was not home, so not knowing what to do I rode back to LES and was late arriving in the classroom (I am guessing by 15-20 minutes). Mr. Dompeir (the principal) met me at the door with an apologetic Mrs. Paul, who communicated that she had made a mistake in striking me and then gave me a hug. Mr. Dompeir said that he wanted to call my mother and explain what had happened, which he and Mrs. Paul later did. Although I know it must have felt somewhat unpleasant to ride my bike home during recess, to this day I still perceive Mrs. Paul's genuine apology and hug as a positive experience. At the end of grade 4 my parents bought a new house in another section of town, and I had to leave LES.

Marrion Elementary School (MES): Grades 5-7

My experience at MES introduced me to how cruel society and an elementary school can be and today makes me appreciate three academic books about the prison-like environments fostered by some schools: *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault, 1977), *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1970), and *Teacher: The One Who Made a Difference* (Edmundson, 2002). Although I remember a few pleasant experiences at MES, most were negative, and the school seemed oppressive. For example, most teachers seemed to watch the clock more closely than students so that they could race out of the classroom when the bell rang.

Simply stated, I felt intense fear at MES. Although the cause of my fear stemmed from many variables (e.g., biological changes in puberty, a new school with no policies to help new students make a transition, no friends/support network, greater focus on achievement scores), the two paramount factors were (a) the teachers were non-caring, and (b) my mother was diagnosed with a serious cancer (from which she eventually died during my senior year in high school). Watching my mother struggle with radiation treatment (e.g., hair loss, vomiting) and thinking daily that she was going to die clearly contributed to my oppressive perspective. In short, I believe that I was suffering from what Seligman (1975, 1990, 2002) calls learned helplessness, a type of depression that is learned because the person feels no control in life. However, in regard to my feelings of fear and helplessness, the school environment at MES was also a paramount cause factor. For example, my free-time experiences there (recess) were no longer a time or space that provided a sense of belonging, a personal identity, or physical and cognitive skill development. In fact they created the opposite: alienation, a sense of meaninglessness, a negative identity perception, and a sense of worthlessness. In particular, MES had a strong ethos

toward hegemonic masculinity. Boys were expected to be aggressive, competitive, and have identities related to physical strength and sport (Messner, 1992). Unlike LES, which had a broad range of play and free-time activity options during recess (e.g., soccer, marbles, hockey, hopscotch, tetherball, building snow forts), the *only* play or free-time activity that aligned to male credibility was football. I learned fast that I had no clue how to catch or throw a football and had to live with the humiliation of being mocked by the other boys as they shouted, "Do not pick him, he is terrible" (see Pollack, 1998, for how boys are shamed if they do not follow the "boy code"). Although I was fast, I was still one of the last boys picked at recess during football games, and was laughed at when I suggested we play soccer or marbles. When I suggested playing hockey, I learned that MES policy did not allow hockey. I spent many recesses wandering around and even spent a little time hanging out with some First Nations students: they were not welcome in football either, but this was due to racism.

Furthermore, and in keeping with hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 1992), the boys viewed girls as sexual objects. The girls were not welcome to play football, and rarely did boys and girls play together. I still vividly remember groups of boys that would "gang-bang" girls who were going through puberty and reach down their pants or up their shirts. Although there was huge pressure to act in the boy culture at MES, I did not participate in any of these activities even when invited by the leaders of the pack. The boys would also crack jokes about girls who were "stacked" or "flat." A few of the girls fought back and would walk up to boys and punch or knee them between the legs. I remember once standing in front of my locker and a girl walked by and punched me in the scrotum and it hurt (I think she was just striking back against boys in general). However, the most disturbing part of this experience was when Mr. Whalen, my grade 7 homeroom teacher, made eye contact with me from across the short hallway right after this incident, shook his head, and then shut his door as he entered the classroom. He had seen what had happened and simply did nothing about it—he walked away. Moments later I walked into my homeroom and felt a weird tension from Mr. Whalen during the entire class for something I had done nothing to provoke. I felt frustrated that this situation was left unresolved and that there was not much I could do. I was too concerned about public reaction if I reported that a girl had "bagged" me (I was already known as being somewhat of a sissy in the boy culture), and because she was a girl, I could not physically strike back. It was a helpless situation. Mr. Whalen's denial only reinforced my powerlessness. This was so different from LES, and at times I would even hide in the bathroom during recess so that I would not have to be part of this demented boy culture and school environment. The rigid boy culture was widespread and most prevalent during free time.

I intensely remember another incident where two girls in grade 7 got into a nasty fight that went on for the entire recess. Both were bleeding from their faces, and almost every student watched the fight. In fact the large group followed the two girls around the entire school field, and not a single teacher was in sight. Finally, a few minutes after the bell rang to signal the end of recess, a teacher ran out to stop the fight.

Perhaps worse: I was also afraid of the teachers. For example, my grades 5 and 6 French teacher Mr. Alvord seemed to enjoy bullying students and used intimidation and fear strategies to control his classroom. Soon after I began grade 5, Mr. Alvord decided to strap a fellow classmate, and he made it a public spectacle, which is similar to prison rituals (Foucault, 1977). Although the student deserved some type of discipline (for disrupting the class repeatedly), Mr. Alvord turned immediately to the strap in order to send a powerful message to the rest of the students. He called the student to the front of the class and explained his crimes as he slowly walked around the student (as in the movies when a shark circles its potential victim). He then gave him four powerful blows, two on each hand. I still remember Mr. Alvord smiling at the student and saying something like, "You'd better start behaving in class" and then let him leave. Mr. Alvord was an awful teacher who could not control his temper. On another occasion he grabbed a male student by the neck and rammed him against the concrete wall and held him up by his neck, feet dangling below. Another time he smashed a yardstick against the desk of a girl who was giggling with another student. The yardstick shattered her pen, and a piece of plastic zoomed across the room and hit me just outside my left eye. I was too afraid to show pain and sat motionless as the left side of my face stung and tears filled my eyes. However, I was going to keep the "boy code" and "never show weakness. Accordingly, boys are not to share pain or grieve openly" (Pollack, 1998, p. 23).

Mr. Alvord demonstrated that he also followed hegemonic masculinity in how he represented women in the classroom. One day at the beginning of the school year while in class, Mr. Alvord asked me what school I had attended the previous year and who had taught me French. I responded that it was LES and that my teacher was Mrs. Darlington. He repeated Mrs. Darlington's name in three syllables, Dar-ling-ton, and for each syllable highlighted her breast size by placing his hands in front of his chest; with each syllable he moved his hands outward to demonstrate her large breasts. The students roared with laughter, and not knowing what to do, I believe I also laughed. It is true that Mrs. Darlington had large breasts; however, Mr. Alvord did not have to reinforce hegemonic masculine notions that reinforce the high status of larger breasts. He was reinforcing a male disease in the classroom, and the students thought it was funny (see Yalom, 1997, about how breast size reinforces the commodification of women as sex objects).

I suppose that disclosing these actions begs the question, Why did students not tell others about these events? Why didn't they tell their parents or go to other teachers? My honest answer is that I am not sure, but my best guess is that no one trusted the teachers and most students were afraid to say anything. I know I did not, and I was literally in culture shock and found myself missing the teachers from LES. As for my family, because I came from a low-socioeconomic and uneducated family, I think I already sensed their powerlessness. Although my parents did the best they could, my mother was from the "old country," was illiterate, spoke broken English, did not drive, often wore a kerchief, and although she was an outstanding mother and skilled cook, she did not know how to be assertive outside the home. My father was a little more educated, and although he was a skilled carpenter, he was also from the "old

country," had a heavy German accent, and would not stand up to any form of authority. This was made even more complicated when soon after I transferred to MES, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I was not going to trouble my already strained parents who were dealing with the horrors of radiation treatment.

Toward the end of grade 7, I began using music (popular culture and mass leisure) as a means to cope with the stressors of life. Leisure, including popular culture, buffers stress, facilitates coping, and provides relatively brief and transient experiences of escapism and psychological hedonism (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). I found that certain songs and musicians helped me cope with life. In particular, I found the musical narrations of Bruce Springsteen meaningful and inspirational. Cavicchi's (1998) qualitative research suggests that Bruce Springsteen fans refer to his music and concerts as inspirational, a religious experience, and as a pilgrimage. Although not aware of it at the time, I am sure I identified with Palmer's (1997) assessment that Springsteen's music underscores hegemonic masculinity, distant relationships between fathers and sons, powerlessness in life due to lower socioeconomic status, and a sense of meaninglessness. I particularly remember identifying with the Springsteen song "Darkness On the Edge of Town," with its lyrics.

Everybody's got a secret Sonny
Something that they just can't face
Some folks spend their whole lives trying to keep it
They carry it with them every step that they take
Till some they just cut it loose
Cut it loose or let it drag 'em down
Where no one asks any questions
Or looks to long in your face
In the darkness on the edge of town. ("Darkness on the Edge of Town,"
Columbia, 1978)

I also felt connected to two Pink Floyd songs, both from the album *The Wall*, CBS Records, 1979, "Another Brick in the Wall" (a song about the social control of schools) and "Comfortably Numb," the lyrics of which end with "The child is grown, the dream is gone. I have become comfortably numb." These songs told stories that I could relate to and helped me escape my problems. Music was a method of coping and seemed to provide a higher degree of respite than anything else in my life.

Harry Junior High School (HJHS): Grades 8-9

Harry Junior High School (HJHS) was located next to MES and followed the same basic educational goals and prison-like culture. As I think back to HJHS, and in the reverse of LES, it all seems bad: like when Adam and Eve were commanded to leave the Garden of Eden. Again, as an academic I know that there had to be experiences at HJHS that were positive, but nothing positive comes to mind. Again, I believe that my all-oppressive perspective had to do with my struggles with learned helplessness as I literally watched my mother transition toward a terrible and painful death. However, I think what made this worse at HJHS was that the teachers were absolutely awful and seemed obsessed with testing and achievement scores. They seemed to have no tolerance for any deviance from the "schedule" and seemed to be absolutely

nowhere when needed. For example, I hated going to my locker during four-minute class breaks because the boys around me were bullies and would knock me around. One day a large student picked me up by my neck and rammed me against the wall. As he was holding me up off of the ground, I could hear cheers from his cohort of friends. Another time while leaving the school to walk home, this same bully and his high school brother threw a snowball that hit me so hard in the back of the head that I literally fell to the ground and saw the color blue (it was more like an iceball than snowball). Furthermore, the increased pressure to do well on tests seemed to be driven by teachers and school administrators so that they could climb the achievement score status ladder. It was strong pressure, and because I did not do well on exams (because I never learned study habits like how to make notes from teachers' lectures, how to read a book analytically, or how to study), I felt that I really had no skills in life. I did not do well in any of the aspects of school, including academics, athletics, or social opportunities. This was made worse because HJHS had little in extracurricular or club opportunities. Beyond basic athletics (e.g., football and basketball) and a few music options (e.g., band), there were few club or other social opportunities (drama, school newspaper, speech and debate, science or history club).

Perhaps the best way to explain how I felt at HJHS is to look at the academic work of Foucault (1977). As Foucault underscored, the basic environment and actions of schools often parallel the basic environment and actions of prisons, and HJHS was an excellent case study. Foucault posited that schools were based on prison procedures in many ways, but two fundamental methods are (a) through the architecture, spatial blocks, and rank order given to schools; and (b) through the use of standardized timetables or schedules.

Similarly and parallel to prison strategies about discipline and punishment, schools use physical, psychological, and sociological architecture for spatial and rank ordering (Foucault, 1977). Schools assign individual spaces (spatial ordering) so that each individual can work independently or alone (as in a prison, few collaborative efforts), while a single supervisor (warden or teacher) observes the entire learning machine with an omnipotent gaze. Marshall (1989), building on Foucault's historic research, explains how modern day schools use prison-like isolation strategies such as enclosure to

prevent distractions or invasions from the outside, whereas the smaller partitioned unit permits any individual to be placed under surveillance at any time ... Cells (desks, beds, etc.) are assigned according to rank which has been established by grading, assessment or examination. The purpose of the cell and the organization of space is to prevent imprecise distribution of people, uncontrolled disappearances, and diffuse dangerous circulation. (p. 106)

Moreover, Foucault posited that the use of standardized timetables and pedagogical techniques also parallel prison strategies for discipline and learning. Like prisons, schools often use rigid and standardized timetables to control students. The underlying goal, as in prisons, is that of prescribing a full day of externally oriented activities to the rigidly established set rhythms of the day. Furthermore, "Whistles, bells, and other more sophisticated devices signal the times for changes in cells and other moves within the timetable" (Marshall, 1989, p. 106). HJHS was primarily external regulation and was not associated

with Illich's (1970) thoughts that, "Good schools try to bring out the common interests in their students" (p. 92). The care ethic and playfulness of LES were clearly gone.

A melancholy stench pervaded HJHS, and its sad climax came when one of our teachers committed suicide. All the students knew that Mr. Mitchell had shot himself in the head, but there were conflicting stories about whether he had died in the classroom or outside school. To this day I still have not learned where the suicide took place: my memory tells me that it happened in the classroom, but two of my close friends tell me that it occurred in Mr. Mitchell's house. I do clearly remember that on the school day after it became public knowledge that Mr. Mitchell had killed himself, there was a class-by-class assembly in the high school chapel. Father Dickason, the junior high and high school priest, began the service with some broad remarks about life and death. He then asked if anyone had questions. The long silence felt eerie and awkward, and I wanted so badly to know where Mr. Mitchell had killed himself. Was it at home? Was it in the classroom? No one asked a question and we were dismissed abruptly. From that day forward I heard not a single comment or question about Mr. Mitchell's death. After his suicide, I always felt strange when I was in his classroom, yet no word was uttered about this: it was like a dark secret that everyone wanted to forget. HJHS had no formal response for dealing with traumatic events and no plan to safeguard the emotional welfare of its students (e.g., post-event activities/interventions, grief counseling, parental notifications). In fact when I told my parents that Dr. Mitchell had killed himself, they thought I was making it up. I do not think they ever believed me.

After enough humiliation in grade 9, I decided to change. Silly as it may sound, the movie *Revenge of the Nerds* played a significant role as it served as a springboard for change. *Revenge of the Nerds* is a 1984 United States comedy in which two nerds enroll in a small college, which is saturated with favoritism toward football and athletes. After enough humiliation, the nerds fight back and eventually overthrow the football hierarchy and become popular. They retaliate by drenching jock straps in Deep Heat so that the football players have an unpleasant experience; covertly filming a panty raid on the cheerleaders; and ultimately getting the football players kicked out of the fraternity house. I can vividly remember hating the nerds in the movie, associating myself as a nerd, and promising myself that I would change. Popular culture can influence both social and personal identity in youth (Brown, Schaffer, Vargas, Romocki, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Mallan & Pearce, 2003). For example, Robertson (1997) reports how teacher films of the late 1960s (e.g., *Up the Down Staircase*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) had a profound influence on her becoming a teacher. Similarly, Kelly (1997) tells a personal narrative about how the movie *To Sir With Love* inspired her to become a teacher. In particular, she explains,

So powerful was the effect of the film, as a preteen viewer, that I remember a range of details of context and feeling that surrounded that first television viewing: the very chair in which I was seated in our family living room ... the discomfort, accentuated by the presence of an adult, that I felt at my own feeling of pleasure during scenes in which the affection between Thackeray, the teacher, and the students is clear. (pp. 125-126)

Just as for Kelly, *Revenge of the Nerds* was so powerful for me that I can still remember a range of details and feelings.

Although this movie was a spoof on male jocks, after it ended I clearly remember standing outside the theater by myself in the dark (after my friend's mother picked him up) waiting for my father and thinking, "I am a real nerd" and feeling intensely embarrassed. To my left was a group of four or five cheerleader-like girls who were talking about the movie, and my thoughts were racing about how these girls would identify me as a nerd. Just like the nerds in the movie, I was a skinny adolescent who wore clothes that signified my lower-class status. The waiting time for my father seemed to last for ever, and the girls kept laughing. I tried to hide from them by trying to blend into the dark brick walls of the building. Finally, my father arrived and picked me up in his "work car," a Chevrolet Bel Air, which was old and falling apart (this was his work car because the trunk was long enough for him to put in his tool-boxes). As I walked to the car, I could hear the girls laughing and was sure that they were laughing at me. My father's Chevrolet Bel Air seemed to reinforce my perceived identity.

Like the nerds in *Revenge of the Nerds*, I was going to retaliate against nerd status. However, instead of retaliating against the male jocks and female cheerleaders in my school, I decided to retaliate against nerd status and become an insider in jock culture and hegemonic masculinity. Soon after, I purchased a membership at the YMCA and began weightlifting: I was going to develop into a "real man" and become muscular.

Central High School (CHS): Grades 10-12

The summer before I entered high school, I almost lived at the YMCA. When summer ended, I remained faithful to my promise to become muscular. The weightroom became my self-created after-school program as I spent hours after school at the YMCA (and later BJ's Gym) almost every day. As I became a serious power lifter (approximately two years after high school I was invited to the Canadian Power lifting National Championship, which was one level below the world championships and the Olympics), the importance of school decreased. (During the 1980s, power lifting was introduced as a trail sport in the Olympics, but it did not gain Olympic status.) BJ's Gym was a hard-core gym dedicated to serious weightlifting, which had both a bodybuilding and power lifting team. During grade 11 I left the YMCA and trained solely at BJ's gym. I did enough work to pass my classes, but I simply did not care about school. Unlike school, the power lifting coach and team in the weight room at the YMCA and BJ's Gym took an interest in me and acted as youth work mentors. As in my LES experiences, the power lifting team at BJ's gym provided a sense of belonging, a personal identity, and physical and cognitive skill development. I was part of a team and part of a community. As McKnight (1995) underscored,

We all know that community must be the center of our lives because it is only in community ... that we can find care. It is only in community that we hear people singing. And if you listen carefully, you can hear the words: "I care for you, because you are mine, and I am yours." (p. 172)

My experiences at the YMCA and BJ's gym were in direct contrast to CHS.

Toward the end of my grade 11 year at CHS, and as I became muscular and somewhat known in my city as a promising power lifter (there were numerous newspaper articles that highlighted my power lifting achievements such as setting provincial and high school power lifting/weightlifting records), the hegemonic males at CHS began to accept me. In fact the high school football coach used me as a model for how the CHS football players should train during the off season. By the middle of my senior year, I was accepted by the hegemonic males and had to act like them to continue to be accepted. I had to discipline myself to the dominant male and gender norms or be punished for deviating from them (Foucault, 1977). Hence I began to be a bully. For example, I would run down the hallways of CHS and body check or slam “weaker” boys against the brick walls while my football buddies would hold them. I deeply regret this part of my life. I felt guilty about how I was acting, but it was great to be popular. At the end of most school days, a few buddies and I would stand at the end of a busy corridor that ended in a T and would flex our biceps to girls walking out of the school.

Without doubt the most difficult aspect of being accepted into hegemonic male norms was how to deal with issues of sexuality (concepts of masculinity) and sexual activity. Because hegemonic masculinity is also based on conquering women through being sexually powerful and active (Kimmel, 1996; Wearing, 1998), I found myself in situations where I did not feel comfortable. For example, one of my first high school parties was a male gathering with underage drinking and illegal pornographic movies. I felt incredibly uncomfortable at this party and simply sipped on a beer while trying to act cool. While watching a pornographic movie, I felt ugly, shameful, and dirty. Although I was struggling and seriously questioning the doctrines of the Catholic Church, I still felt that sexual activity was a sacred experience shared only in the bonds of marriage. Instead of leaving the party, I wimped out and stayed to the end, hating myself for not being brave enough to leave and hating what I was viewing. Watching a raunchy illegal pornographic movie that glorified violence against women made me feel literally sick to my stomach (see Dworkin, 1978, about how pornography is at the core of female oppression and violence). However, I so badly wished to maintain my insider position in male culture that I suppose I rationalized it as what was needed to be done. As a young man I did not feel comfortable with these hegemonic male values, but I was not going to go against the “boy code.”

At another high school house party a young woman (from another high school) came up to me and said that she wanted to have sex with me. From what I remember, I said, “maybe later if you’re lucky,” and afterward was able to sneak out the back door and walk home. Although I knew that I would have to make up some story and would be mocked by others, I felt good walking home because I was following my value system. To my surprise, nothing was ever mentioned: I think many of my so-called friends were too self-absorbed and drunk to realize that I had left.

I found the house parties repugnant. For males these parties centered on wild drinking contests, seeing who could have more sexual activity, or sharing stories about the importance of having a large penis. I did not feel comfortable going to the hegemonic masculine parties where drinking and sex were con-

sidered true characteristics of real men, and I used a part-time job as a doorman at a movie theater as a good excuse to not attend. However, I did not wish to let go of my hegemonic male status: I had suffered enough humiliation through the latter part of elementary and junior high school and did not wish to return to those days. In particular, I requested to work every Friday and Saturday night so that I would have an excuse not to attend house parties (after work, around midnight, I simply went home). I also used other strategies in high school such as purposely getting a detention on a Friday after school so that I had an excuse for not attending a preplanned gathering at a bar that had female strippers. Toward the end of high school many of the seniors, including myself, were 18 years of age and could legally attend such bars. By getting a detention I was still keeping the “boy code” through acting like a rebel. However, I found myself becoming more and more confused about how I should act. Furthermore, I had no one to talk to about these issues. Although my parents did many good things, when it came to issues of sexuality, they were unapproachable and I did not feel comfortable talking to any Catholic Church representative (e.g., priest or religion teacher), because they seemed more focused on hard-nosed religion classes oriented toward a punishing God than providing acts of caring by simply listening.

Although high school was a confusing time for me, I found a ray of hope from one of my teachers, and one to whom I still owe much in my life. Mr. Berne was the retired football coach; however, he did not reinforce hegemonic male gender and was passionate about his subject area (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, about the importance of teachers who are passionate about their subject area and the relationship between passion and the development of creativity). In many ways he was a role model for me on how males should act. One day during my senior year, he asked me to stay after class to chat about the harmful affects of steroid use. He never asked me if I was using steroids, but I am sure he knew that I was seriously contemplating using “the juice” and suspect that he overheard me talking about potential steroid use with some of the football players before his class. The underlying lesson behind his lectures was that he cared about me, and as Noddings (2003) states, he modeled kindness. Mr. Berne was not like Mr. Whalen who observed a troubling situation and then walked away. Rather, he acted with compassion and courage to address a problematic situation.

High school was a dark and confusing time for me for many reasons. The paramount reason was because my mother was dying of cancer (and died right after I graduated). However, the gym and weightlifting caused respite and escape from a cruel and dreadful world because they (a) created a way to compensate for unmet needs in other aspects of my life; (b) gave me an identity (athlete); and (c) influenced my mental health by facilitating coping behaviors in response to stressful life events. This individualized and self-created after-school program did what research suggests that good recreation-oriented after-school programs achieve: it fostered thriving and healthy behavior and reduced the potential for negative behavior (Witt, 2005). Power lifting at BJ’s gym was an after-school activity that was a coping mechanism that I used to escape and deal with the stressors of life. Beyond the escapism it provided, I was part of a community, which had been missing in my life.

Perhaps the single event that highlighted Mr. Berne's caring disposition was when I confused an act of caring with a sexually inappropriate action and was suspended from CHS. At BJ's Gym a group of power lifters were joking in a hegemonic masculine way and gave me a "wet-willy" (they stuck their fingers in their mouths to wet them and then placed them in my ear). I did not connect this action with any type of sexual intent or as a sexual metaphor for intercourse—I was naïve. Further, I associated it with fun and honest horsing-around behavior. One day in Mrs. Goodale's class, when I was standing behind her waiting my turn to talk to her, for some unknown reason I gave her a wet-willy. Reflecting on this for many years, I think I was simply joking like the boys at the gym who would give each other wet-willies. I will never forget the look on Mrs. Goodale's face, and I knew I had done something terrible. Within an hour I was in the principal's office. Mr. Sneegles gave me an immediate suspension and explained that he was going to ban me from CHS. There was only about a month left in the school year, and I needed three credits (one course) to graduate from high school, so my graduation was in jeopardy.

I then realized what a wet-willy meant, apologized profusely to Mr. Sneegles, and asked if I could apologize to Mrs. Goodale. Mr. Sneegles, yelling at me, said that I could not be naïve and stupid enough not to know what a wet-willy meant. He then accused me of lying and banned me from CHS. In fact I really *was* that naïve. My parents were shocked and sided with Mr. Sneegle.

The only two teachers, or anyone for that matter, who came to my defense were Mr. Berne, and to a lesser degree Mr. Jones. Mr. Berne asked me why I would give Mrs. Goodale a wet-willy and then did something that should be at the core of any good teacher: he listened to my story. One of the best things that any teacher can do to communicate that a person has worth is to take the time to listen and gain empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own (Cormeir & Cormeir, 1991) and is an attempt to think within, rather than for or about, the person (Brammer, Shostrom, & Abrego, 1989). Whereas Mr. Sneegles thought of the wet-willy from a sexual harassment perspective, Mr. Berne was able to understand my frame of reference. Further, being a past football athlete and coach, Mr. Berne understood (but did not support) hegemonic masculinity. I still remember his words: "It sounds like you really confused what was acceptable around the guys at the gym with what is acceptable in school. You made a huge mistake." Mr. Berne recognized that I had made a huge yet truly honest mistake. More important, he also recognized my own empathy as I recognized how Mrs. Goodale had interpreted my action and how bad I felt for what I had done to her. Mr. Berne, and I believe Mr. Jones, spoke to the principal and Mrs. Goodale and developed an independent class so that I could graduate from CHS. The bulk of this class was a rigorous research paper focused on the unhealthy side effects of steroid use and the healthy use of nutritional supplements. Even in this situation, Mr. Berne was thinking of my best interests, and I believe that the paper on the harmful affects of steroids and one of the books I read—*Death in the Locker Room: Steroids, Cocaine and Sports* (Goldman, Bush, & Klatz, 1984)—had a serious influence on me when I decided not to use steroids. Moreover, I realized how exciting research and writing academic papers could

be when based on intrinsic motivation. This paper helped me to realize that there were academic programs in sport science, sport psychology, physical education, and leisure studies and that my future educational pursuits could be oriented toward studying something I found intrinsically interesting. As an associate professor I have followed this line of research for my academic vocation.

Conclusion

Because one of the purposes of autoethnographical research is to move the reader to deal with similar moral, ethical, and complex issues by seeing and managing the reader's events in their settings and lives (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Sardin, 2004) and is not interested in cause-and-effect relationships or developing universal generalizations, perhaps the best way to end this story is to follow the suggestion of Eisner (1998). Writing about qualitative research in educational settings, Eisner argues that it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines how to generalize or use research findings in their unique educational settings. That is, autoethnographical research provides ideas and thoughts to be considered in professional settings. To this end, I hope readers are moved by my story and can use it in understanding the complex web of multiple forces in life that are located in schools (i.e., educational policy, hegemonic masculinity and femininity, play and recreation, family history, family health problems [e.g., mother dying of cancer], youth identity development, popular culture, care theory, socioeconomic status, extracurricular school clubs) and in making difficult decisions about improving the ecology of schooling (Eisner, 1988, 1998).

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I am indebted to a teacher at LES who helped me retrieve the fighting song of the Fiery Fours. Because I do not wish to reveal the names of the schools and teachers in this narrative, I cannot reveal her name. However, she worked at Marrion Elementary school, which I attended from grades 5-7 (I did not have her as a teacher). In a recent e-mail she commented that she was currently the longest serving Fiery Four in LES as she also attended LES as a student.

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