TO INSPIRE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION:

WHAT IS THE LIVED CURRICULUM

WE HAVE CO-CREATED

AT THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL?

by

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To Inspire Social Justice and School Transformation: What is the Lived Curriculum We Have Co-Created at the Community School?

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Abstract

This study seeks to inspire innovative practice in teaching that can inform the design of 21st century learning environments, a need that prescriptive pedagogy and one size fits all methods do not address though they remain the dominant discourse and practice. This study takes a mindful stance, providing data with soul, to stimulate conversations among teachers, parents, the school system, and the community towards the goal of school transformation.

The Community School (VCS) was the research site for this study. The life of VCS was documented over the period of its inaugural year using Practioner inquiry and Portraiture. This study of living utilized classroom artifacts, audio-recordings, field notes, open-ended responses and student journal writing, interviews, a research journal and photographs. The synthesis of all this data went through several inductive processes, for both teachers and students.

This study intersects theory, research, and practice—an illustrative example of emergent, responsive, and co-created curriculum. It unpacks and connects notions such as reverence, mindfulness, social justice, student-centred learning, and living curriculum that embody both relational epistemology and social justice rooted in community. It recognizes the unpredictable complexity of authentic growth and the reality that knowledge is provisional, textual, multiple, and never finished or complete. The Community School is becoming an example to other educators in British Columbia of how really trusting in principles of learning like patience and time stimulates deep root, whole-person growth and fruitful thinking that sustains itself.
Though the work of this study is nested in the particulars of VCS—one school of 56 students in grades 7-9—and therefore cannot be generalizable, it concludes that in order for 21st century practices to take root there is a need for an educational culture that is non-judgmental, reverential, and openly supportive of diverse ways of being and doing in the world. To this end, this study also concludes that the enthusiasm of this practitioner researcher for lived curriculum must be tempered in order for threatened yet curious colleagues to feel safe entering into conversations about the educational possibilities of VCS as one example that holds the potential for school transformation.
Preface

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.

That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach

who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred;

who believe that our work is not merely to share information,

but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students

is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions

where learning can most deeply and intimately begin

(hooks, 1994, p. 13).

I have learned to take things up and in that I have become more confident.

I have discovered interests I did not know I had.

And, I am more open to improvements.

I used to just want to disappear.

I am learning what it means to be a real leader.

And above all, I am learning who I am


This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Kimberley Ondrik.

The UBC Okanagan Behavioural Research Ethics Board approval number for this research is: H14-0235.
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There was a time, not so very long ago, that I was ready to step away from teaching. I am humbled by mystical intervention and the introduction of the spirited Leyton Schnellert into my life. His genius for justice, endless enthusiasm, and deeply rooted belief in who I am and what I stand for has been life giving these past five years; I am a braver person because of Leyton. I will always be very grateful, and look forward to our continued collaboration, and future dance opportunities.

The gift of Margaret Macintyre Latta’s attention, authenticity, and friendship, has been a pearl of great price. She has been a powerful mentor of great visions, astonishing words, and abundant generosity; bringing Dr. David Hansen to visit VCS last Fall was extraordinary. I am a stronger learner and more thoughtful teacher because of Margaret’s influence. I will always be very grateful, and look forward to our continued collaboration as well.

Karen Ragoonaden has been a breath of fresh air during my graduate studies. Her beautiful smile, compassionate spirit, and joyful presence make my heart sing. I am grateful to her loving presence, and awe-inspiring dance moves. I hope we can collaborate in the future.

What do I say about you, Murray Sasges? Without your imaginings, passion, and stubborn determination, there would be no Community School. I also know I would be less reverential, less aware, less wise, less secure; certainly not as impactful as teacher without your presence. I value your friendship tremendously; I can’t believe I get to teach
and learn alongside someone so intelligent, rabbinical, goofy, and feisty every day! Wow. Lucky me.

Thank you to all of my dear, committed friends who helped me to birth this paper—*in particular*: April, Cayla, Danica, Dash, Janice, Judith, Kazia, Michelle, Sheila. I didn’t know if it would ever arrive; thank you for helping me breathe through the hardest bits.

I am very grateful for the time, space, and roominess that my kind and patient husband Doug has provided; I am grateful that he understands how important this work is to me and how he picked up the slack. Will, Jake, Charis and Isaiah—my amazing sons—you provoke me, love me, and believe in me. You have taught *me* the power of attachment, the wonder of diversity, and the healing balm of forgiveness. Thank you for constantly pushing me out of my comfort zone.

*Finally*, without the example of my beloved aunt, Shannon Hack, who lived an inspirted curriculum in her primary classroom every day; and the voiced expectation of my cherished grandma, Bertha Dell, who told me to complete my education degree before anything else, I know I would not be at this place on my journey. *I am very grateful.*
Dedication

This is a documented journey of love.

It has emerged as a result of my parents’ extraordinary commitment to my ongoing learning and growth;

their responsiveness to my sacred calling as Teacher.

Without their financial sacrifice, I would not have been enabled to turn my gaze inward.

My gratitude for this love is deep and wide.

It has changed my life.

And to all the young people -

in the Friendship Company, the Garden, the Eagle’s Nest, the Ozone, and VCS - who have been my teachers.

Thank you for making me laugh; disrupting my thinking; humbling my spirit; and inspiring me to grow.
1. Introduction

“Hey Kim!” shouts the tall, stunning fourteen year old brunette from the corner of the darkened cafeteria over the loud music. It’s ten o’clock and parents have begun arriving to gather their children from the Red Carpet year-end dance party. I look up–attending to the loud and vivacious response from a young woman who has oft’ vocalized that she wished she could live in a cave to avoid people and their complexity entirely–and wave with energy flowing from my amazement. “Bye Anastasia!” “No” she shouts again and I stop dancing and stand upright–fully attentive. My eyebrows pinch and quizzically ask why. Anastasia beckons with her arm and I quickly move towards her. I notice her Dad a few steps ahead as she leads me outside and nudges me to the side. Turning quickly, Anastasia faces me and grabs my forearms. I am entranced by the unexpected. From a strong and breathy voice–“I want you to know that you have changed my life. I’m a totally different person now.” Big smile. Wide open arms. Wild hair from dancing. My heart sings at her words. And then an embrace–an intense, deeply felt encircling of spirit - “Thank you.” Her deep calls to my deep and the only words that tumble out–“I love you Anastasia.” “I love you too.” Vulnerable, I seek out her Dad. Wet eyes. Warm smile.

A quiet, mature, respectful student, Anastasia did not demand my attention or ask for support all year. Her expectations were already self-imposed and self-regulated. She preferred to be left alone with very little input from without. And yet from her perspective, I changed her life. How did this happen? Was her growth like that of roots deep under the visible surface? Or had it been so subtle, a whisper in a cacophony of sounds that I had not tuned in? Opening my journals, I search for clues. Were there any
other students verdant without my direct involvement? I wonder too if benign neglect creates space and roominess for growth without the hindrance of pestering attention? Is this critical knowledge for an extrovert like me? And when or to whom might space imply dismissal? What else can I learn from the wonderings like these that have emerged from my heart, mind, and spirit over the past year?

I am a teacher. I have a heart for social justice that has led me to conceptualize this mysterious work called teaching and learning as seeds, roots, growth, decay, pruning, seasons, diversity, interconnectedness. This organic, ecological metaphor acknowledges that to promote growth and development in every learner, I must see the unique living being of each; considering the unique growing conditions needed—rooted in both nature and nurture. What are their personalities, gifts, limits, fears, insecurities, experience, passions. What is her heart is calling her to become? What are the relations he needs to develop more fully? Moreover, “the process of self-definition is delicate and intricate” (Peterson, 1994, p. 17) and as teacher I need to respect this unveiling—as difficult as it is at times.

Like the complexity of ecology then, I “become absorbed in relations that cannot be reduced to a set of applied rules” (Macintyre Latta, 2013, p. 86). How do I, as teacher, remain mindful of the creation of a learning culture ever-in-the-making that encourages risk taking so each may begin to expose his fragile, authentic, emerging self to the world (Neufeld & Mate, 2004)? Kessler (2000) imagines this inner world as the soul. Noddings (1984) offers the view that these processes of teaching and learning are fundamentally non-rational and intuitive, not easily explained with words alone—“As the teacher receives the child and works with him on cooperatively designed projects, as she resists the
temptation—or the mandate—to manipulate the child, to squeeze him into some mold, she establishes a climate of receptivity” (p. 60). Time and time again, children have taught me that teaching requires the preeminence of relational attunement—a patience and wisdom to watch, wonder, and wait. When I do so, learning becomes incomparably more productive.

The challenge of whole-hearted and whole-minded living in a classroom that honours these organic principles has stimulated the asking of many questions in my work as socially just teacher ever-emerging. At the same time, no matter my passion, my vision, my work at the fringes, or the powerful outcomes for children, I have found myself dismissed by the followers of education’s present dominant discourse. The impositional, “I know what’s best for you” mindset (hooks, 1994; Sirolli, 1999; Y. Zhao, personal communication, January 30, 2015), ignores the natural and complex diversity of humanity and the criticality of acknowledging this reality in classroom life - “a way to do has become the way to do, indifferent to differences in the lived world of teachers and students” (Aoki, 2004, p. 368). I have experienced great discouragement by the intransigence of traditional schooling practices akin to theorists such as Aoki, 1993; Dewey, 1938; McLaren, 1989; Pinar, 2004. As a result, I have incubated strong beliefs; wrestled with, discovered, and refined theories; and developed a determined resolve to change the prevailing metaphors and practices embedded in our current educational systems. I continue to question and seek to disrupt the perspective of curriculum-as-planned; the hegemony of written language; the assumptions underlying conformity and behaviorism; and the effects of this social engineering (Eisner, 2005; Pinar, 2004) and curricular fabrication (Arendt, 1958) on children.
Some schooling practices I have witnessed have “brutal features” (Dewey, 1938, p. 19) and others are mis-educative as they have “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further development” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Like Greene (1995), the consequent injustice I feel is seismic. She writes “can anyone hide any longer from the troubling fact that industrialized, technological societies have turned out to be fundamentally unequal ones when it comes to status and reward, that they parcel out unequal life chances” (p. 170). Looking back on my twenty-five years of practice, I see that I have not been hiding. I have been an incessant voice for fairness and equity. Even as a child, I was agitated by teachers who had the same expectations for everyone—who seemed to believe that fairness is sameness. Judgment flourishes within this mindset, and compassion disappears—both for others and for oneself. At times, it has even seemed evil (Dewey, 1902). I add my voice and experience to others (Aoki, 2004; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1993; Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994; Macintyre Latta, 2013; Pinar, 2004) who seek to reframe education. I dream of a revolution in teaching where teachers relinquish prescriptive pedagogy and look, really look at the unique creations living before them.

Striving “towards some coherent notion of what is human and decent and just” (Greene, 1995, p. 1), and responding to the critical need for responsive, personalized, place based, justice based, and inquiry based teaching and learning in our community, I have co-created a Community School (Vernon Community School) along with teacher Murray Sasges, fifty-six students, fifty-five families, the greater community of Vernon, and two professors from the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus. VCS is an innovative learning opportunity for students in grades 7 to 9 situated in a secondary school - a traditional high school setting comprised of grades 8 to 12 with 650 students.
VCS is the first educational context of its kind in our school district; it is a place of mindful teaching and learning rooted in social justice—grounded in the unique people, geography, economy and challenges of the region. Unlike other choices in our district, it is free and thus available to all families. It is positioned in a current shift in the British Columbia provincial curriculum and Ministry of Education initiatives aimed to provide greater academic freedom (Pinar, 2004) for teachers to more mindfully approach teaching and learning based upon theory and research; an effort to inform the design of 21st century learning environments and inspire innovative practice (Dumont, Instance & Benevides, 2010).

This research inquires into the school’s first year of enactment - “the fleshy, familiar, very concrete world of teachers and students” (Aoki, 2004, p. 189) - focuses upon the lived curriculum (Aoki, 1993) and asks how curriculum can become inspiring as it moves “toward a reclaiming of the fullness of body and soul” (Aoki, 2014, p. 359)—for students, for teachers, for parents, for the community. Like Greene (1988), I believe that “When people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged …” (p. 9).

And so we began.
2. Positioning This Inquiry

My quarter century of teaching has provoked me to crack open, root, grow, and be pruned to grow in healthier ways once more. As I unpack some of these experiences, I am becoming more aware—“about openings, about possibilities, about moving in quest and in pursuit” (Greene, 1995, p. 15). I notice too that I have been engaging and re-engaging—dreaming, theorizing, producing, practicing, reflecting, refining—in virtuous circling (Garrison, 2013, p. 9), moving always closer towards ethical practices which nurture growth in each and every student. Untangling each root—some thick and obvious, others fragile and almost invisible—is important work as I seek to make meaning that may inspire and provoke others.

I can see now that my early days of practice blessed me with powerful teacher mentors—Judith King, Maureen Dockendorf, Faye Brownlie, Randy Cranston—who spoke with authority about my capacities, my gifts, the substantial impact I was having on children’s lives, and areas I might want to consider developing. I was invited to participate in teacher research groups where my passion was affirmed, my actions questioned, and my assumptions challenged. Here is where my inquiring habit began—my wondering, my researching—exploring best ways to stimulate whole-person growth in each, as well as the capacity to seek feedback, learning to discern what to attend to and what to ignore. These roots brought nourishing sustenance into my heart, mind, and spirit. It was a season of substantive growth.

My middle years of practice were influenced by the new learning I was experiencing as a parent—immersed in the reality that four children raised by the same parents are different, unique and require particular attention to grow and develop. Living
alongside friends and colleagues as they raised their children animated this variegation even further. This time, as teacher/mother-researcher, I was ever questioning motives, triggers, nature, nurture; challenging the status quo by trying, and then trying again in another way. This growth was more subtle, more soulful, impossible to chart as it reached down deep seeking sources of sustainable nourishment.

Contemporary days find me employing this substantial collection of lived data to co-create sites of lived curriculum, of generative practice, of tinkering, “the taking of initiatives” (Greene, 1995, p. 15). This is the journey that has led me to the Community School. Through the writing of this paper, I have become aware that flourishing is the gift of my disposition as researcher—providing me anchorage and nourishment when storms, droughts and seasons of toxicity have hit.

It was in my returning to school, situated this time as learner, that I have come to relate my deep grooves of lived experience to well-worn paths of scholarly discourse. I can see that this braiding of practice and theory over the past three years has enlivened my soul, gradually moving me towards greater pedagogical confidence away from a defensive posture of feeling alone and very often dismissed and objectified (Buber, 1970), unable at times, like Greene (1988) “to breathe” (p. 14). Prior to my entry into graduate school, I was ready to walk away from teaching. I found myself in very barren and often mephitic land. I lost heart, and was exhausted from advocating for children - standing my ground against the dominant discourse of this place. Like hooks (1994), “I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend–to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (p. 59). By being introduced to critical friends such as Aoki, Dewey, Freire,
Greene, Hansen, hooks, Macintyre Latta, Nodding, Pinar, and Rud, encountering stimulating thoughts within texts, and through rich and provocative dialogue, I can see, upon reflection while writing this paper, that I am re-finding stability, satiation, and energy for continued growth and fruitfulness. My confidence has re-emerged to once again push against the dominant discourse. For this, I am profoundly grateful.

Taking up the familiar stance as teacher-researcher, I have invested a year documenting the life of the Community School—what we did, what we said, the feelings, the tensions, the moods experienced—as artifacts, audio-recordings, field notes and journals, and photographs. New for me was the formal curation and study of living in a classroom; and exercising a kind of discipline that has taken some getting used to. It’s one thing to be alert and responsive to the “archi-texture of curricular landscapes” (Aoki, 2004, p.199), it’s quite another to collect bits and pieces while at the same time responding in any given moment. Have you tried to catch dandelion seeds as they dance in the wind? And yet, the way of living together at the Community School—the innovative movements of learning and growth gaining substance and taking shape (Macintyre Latta, 2013, p. 86)—may contain the potential to inspire others to re-imagine education as I illustrate what one socially just school looks like, feels like, sounds like.

**Conception of Mindfulness**

From the beginning, my intention, along with colleague Murray Sasges, has been to situate our work in wide-awakeness (Greene, 1995). The Community School says that it is a place of mindful teaching and learning—as a host welcomes a stranger (Rud,1995; Nouwen, 1975); a gardener attends to biological particulars (Vanier, 1979); a mermaid explores the depths (Nim, 1950); or like Chuang Tzu’s skillful butcher attempts to discern
the true nature of the other before acting (as cited in Palmer, 1990). Through this mindful inquiry I too am slowing down, watching carefully, holding back, barely moving (Palmer, 1990). Rud encourages me to pay attention to my reactions of what may be new and different, and to listen deeply to the unfamiliar voice of the other. Nouwen suggests that the stranger may have a mysterious and even sacred purpose—one that has the potential to benefit me tremendously, if I lean in. Nim calls me to take up my natural curiosity and fully embrace my desire to go deeper—understanding people, communities, situations, problems as fully as I am able, then to consider even more possibilities outside of my existing comfort zone of conceptions, theories, beliefs, values. These are the particulars of mindfulness aspired to at the Community School.

Running parallel is an awareness that mindfulness is sidetracked by my cravings to know and understand now. I am impatiently energetic by nature, and quick to respond. The disposition of a mermaid—“I have no fear of depths and a great fear of shallow living” (Nin, 1959)—has been the greatest and most challenging gift given me at birth. I am intense and ever questioning. At times called too much by those closest, I seem to be ever attentive of what’s going on around me as I live and interact in the world—intellectually, emotionally, physically, spiritually. I am always questioning, filtering, deliberating—provoked to make meaning. This awareness and wondering about the behaviours and motives of others—“a special sensitivity to unconscious signals manifesting the needs of others” (Miller, 1997, p. 8)—has the potential to lead to revelations, insights and instantaneous understanding, while blinding me from more tentative alternatives that take time, space and roominess to emerge (Dewey, 2005). Through the discipline of inquiry, I hope to navigate this tension.
Conception of Social Justice

The Community School is rooted in social justice. How did we imagine challenging injustice and valuing diversity in this place? My substantial inner work through a quarter century of theorizing, practice, and my recent graduate studies have refined my conception of justice in schools—“towards some coherent notion of what is human and decent” (Greene, 1995, p. 1). It has deepened my understanding of what embodiment of the golden rule could mean in classrooms—the primacy of relationships before anything else (Macintyre Latta, 2013; Thayer-Bacon, 1995); with love flourishing (hooks, 2000); “living that is culturally respectful and socially just” (Benham & Murakami, 2013, p. 149). This is classroom life that facilitates for each “the capacities that are struggling for manifestation in him” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 74); whose content unlocks “the wealth of social capital” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 69); promoting desirable future experiences (Dewey, 1938). The effects of which support young people to grow up and find the courage to be who they really are.

While looking for an overarching interpretation of social justice within my teaching and inquiry, I was drawn to Rud and Garrison’s (2010) conception of reverence in teaching that “arises from a profound comprehension of human limitation, frailty, and finitude, prompting awe and wonder at the incomprehensible” (p. 2777-2778). This approach recognizes that all knowledge is incomplete and provisional. This stance requires disciplined, effortful listening, a reflective reviewing (Aoki, 2014), a state of vulnerable openness (Rud, 2012), a receptive-intuitive mode that “allows us to receive the object, to put ourselves quietly into its presence” (Noddings, 2003, p. 34) resisting the urge to act. Consequently, attending to the immediate living at hand requires an awareness
of the polyphony of inner lives–mine included–that can lead to a desire to stir myself, my colleagues and the students to animated living (Aoki, 2014). Within the noise, energy and tensionality of a classroom community I wonder if I will be able to quiet my busy mind so I can be of greater service to my students as accompanying pedagogue (Vanier, 1998; van Manen, 1994)? Will I be able to deepen learning by asking wise questions at the fitting time to the right student? Will my provocations disrupt assumptions and create openings in the previously closed? Will I be able to let confusion pregnantly sit a while whilst paying loving attention in the messiness?

At the same time, I see that my strong emotions and resultant energies of reason (Damasio, 2000) can ignite creativity and animate my practice. Palmer (1990) suggests that contemplative practices, which penetrate illusion and bring us closer to a larger and more complete reality, also require a movement to action:

But as we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us, and we reshape our inner selves.

When we act, the world acts back, and we and the world are co-created (p. 17).

In the past, being engaged and interactive has allowed me to relate to and problem solve with students - “Magnificent rows, magnificent reconciliations, the surging and soaring of magnificent feeling” (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 19). The inner tension that can emerge between contemplation and action is significant in a busy classroom setting; entering into this inquiry I could not help but wonder, what growth will I hinder in myself or my students when I don’t get it right? Growth is my primary focus after all as teacher, and I aspire to Dewey’s (1938) vision that “attentive care must be devoted to the conditions
which give each present experience a worthwhile meaning” (p. 20). I do not believe in
the Western ideal of the detached, distant and systematic teacher (Freire, 1996; Noddings,
2003). Still, what a temptation Busyness can be—mocking my attempts at reverence,
patronizingly whispering, “How can you trust that the students will choose to learn?
Aren’t you wasting their time? Is this really learning? Are you really teaching?”

Conception of Children

In addition, this inquiry is rooted in the belief that the children we greet into the
Community School are unique and original, as much as they are diverse and
interdependent (Vanier, 1979). Each comes from a unique family culture woven from
generational strands, sometimes pervasive and sometimes periodic; opportunity and
challenge; privilege and poverty (hooks, 1994; Vanier, 1979); attachment and neglect
(Neufeld & Mate, 2004; Perry, et al, 1995); hospitality and control (Dewey, 1938; Freire,
1993; hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2003). This hidden reality is substantiated by Lakota
educators Brendtro & Brokenleg (2002) when they imagine the dragging around of “a
cultural tail a thousand years long, as well as our more personal family tales” (p. 39).

Each child will also carry a unique genetic makeup deep within that determines
potential capacities and vulnerabilities, which at the same time is significantly impacted
by the variety of ecologies one has been planted in. Each child truly is a mysterious and
sacred being (Bredero & Brokenleg, 2002). To further complicate matters it’s not even
possible to generalize traits or experiences in families. Winnicott (1986) argues –

If a mother has eight children, there are eight mothers. This is not simply because
of the fact that the mother was different in her attributes to each of the eight. If she
could have been the same with each…each child would have had his or her own
mother seen through individual eyes (as cited in Mate, 2000, p. 57).

This inquiry acknowledges that a multiplicity of expectations, desires, concerns,
perspectives, and experience exist within a typical classroom community (see, for
understand that this will also most likely be the profile of the Community School.

Throughout my practice I have noticed that some children thrive in their families
of origin, some navigate strategically, others flounder. Still others suffer traumatic
experiences that they have no power to change. How any particular child responds is
unpredictable and its significance on growth and development cannot be minimized; its
impact on classroom life is tremendous and often ignored (hooks, 1994; Kozol, 1991;
Vanier, 1998; Van der kolk, 2014). Wounded children can be blamed for their disruptive
behaviour at school, and as a result are retraumatized (Collin-Vezina, et al, 2010; Mate,
2008; Tishelman, et al, 2010; Van der kolk, 2014). Other times, children are ignored
while they wither within, yet are still able to perform school tasks (Van der kolk, 2014).

Children are not resilient, children are malleable. In the process of “getting over
it”, elements of their true emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social potential are
diminished–some percentage of capacity is lost, a piece of the child is lost forever
(p. 285).

This inquiry takes the stance that a socially just classroom is a safe place for each
child and adult to talk about his unique life, her whole life, and in sharing these
experiences, provoke and inspire others in the community to think and feel–“The heart of
justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be” (hooks, 2000, p. 33). Otherwise, as Van der kolk (2014) asserts—“Hiding your core feelings takes an enormous amount of energy; it saps your motivation to pursue worthwhile goals, and it leaves you feeling bored and shut down” (p. 233).

Working from this dialogic, inquiries and protocols at VCS will provide an example of how the more bleak and painful aspects of being human can be communicated (Aoki, 2004; Davis, 2009; Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2006; Vanier, 1998) as the “public story and inner experience … meet” (Van der kolk, 2014, p. 237). The ecology of the Community School hopefully imagines that when judgment is removed, vulnerability emerges, learning flourishes, and not just for the children who have been traumatized and struggle, but for all (hooks, 1994, p. 19).

I am mindful that acting from an inclusive vantage point acknowledges “that there cannot be a single standard of humanness” (Greene, 1993, p. 212). There are no “certitudes or dogmas, proven recipes that can be applied to every situation” (Lessing, 1986, p. 27). I am also conscious of the temptation to take up aspects of social engineering (Dewey, 1938; Pinar, 2004) to manage the resultant chaos and messiness in the classroom as “the environment, the world of experience, constantly grows larger and, so to speak, thicker” (Dewey, 1938, p. 74). The Community School is rooted in the notion that there is no right technique, no right organization, no right way to teach (Pinar, 2004) when one takes up a living curriculum—the challenge of honouring, including and stimulating the growth of each student. We endeavor to enact these ideas, this thinking “that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a
more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world” (Greene, 1995, p. 5). It is an inspiring and daunting aspiration.

**Conception of Curriculum**

What then, is the concept of curriculum taken up in this inquiry? There is no doubt that embodying uniqueness and diversity in a classroom environment leaves wanting the dominant discourse of curriculum-as-planned, behaviourism, and standardized curriculum that focuses upon content. Aoki (2012) writes, “she [the teacher] knows that uniqueness disappears into the shadow when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language of the external curriculum planners who are, in a sense, condemned to plan for faceless people, students shorn of their uniqueness” (p. 203). Dewey (1902) continues this thought –

the ‘old education’ tended to ignore the dynamic quality, the developing force inherent in the child’s present experience, and therefore to assume that direction and control were just matters of arbitrarily putting the child in a given path and compelling him to walk there (p. 113-114).

Pinar (2004) labels these processes ventriloquism and mime (p. 186); Arendt (1958) calls them fabrication. Instead, this inquiry offers documentation of the Community School’s intentions and efforts to create lived, inspired curriculum (Aoki, 2004), and inspire complicating conversations (Pinar, 2004) that we hopefully and joyfully imagine will cultivate each child’s unique growth and development (Dewey, 1915).

Inspired curriculum pays attention to Aoki’s vision of the happenings in the classroom provoking and enlivening *all* aspects of the learner–body, mind, heart, spirit. Abandoning notions of the fixed and ready made as content and experiences are
conceived as “fluent, embryonic, vital” (Dewey, 1902, p. 109). In addition, true human presence and relating is critical as inspired curriculum is rooted in the assertion of “doing” and “being” enfolded in “becoming” (Aoki, 2004, p. 361). Pinar’s (2004) notion of curriculum as complicated conversation offers a disciplined practice moving classroom life towards inspiredness—

employing school knowledge to complicate our understanding of ourselves and the society in which we live (p. 186) enabling us to think and act with intelligence, sensitivity, and courage in both the public sphere, as citizens aspiring to establish a democratic society, and in the private sphere, as individuals committed to other individuals (p. 187).

Viewing curriculum through this lens has the potential to provoke change and move our community towards greater social justice (Freire, 1996). Moving our community away from prescription, one size fits all, and the consequent oppressive competitiveness enlivened by these practices (Eisner, 1987; Nouwen, 1975; Palmer, 1999) into responsive pedagogy, which offers students daily opportunities to experience issues, provocations and dilemmas, and be prompted to consider a multiplicity of points of view, opinions and answers. It is my hope that this chronicling of the daily life of the Community School will elaborate on the criticality of nurturing caring relationships (Nodding 2003) leading to deep learning; develop competencies of communicative action and reflection (Aoki, 2004) that promote and sustain ever more democratic ecologies (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2011; Dewey, 2005; Freire, 1995; Noddings, 2003), and provide an environment that stimulates the development of human beings with ever more whole hearts, minds and spirits (Palmer, 2010).
3. Methodology

The Community School is invested in providing data with soul (Brown, 2010), and a mindful stance to stimulate conversations (Pinar, 2004) among teachers, parents, the school system, and the community to complicate and challenge deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning. Those beliefs are presently not always inclusive nor verdant and are sometimes even impoverishing—teaching reduced to implementing and learning as mere reproducing (Aoki, 2014, p. 362). Our discourse and living of curriculum, while challenging and messy (figuratively and literally) intentionally approaches dialogue with an attitude of hospitality (Rud, 1995), mindful that knowledge is provisional, textual, multiple, and never finished or complete (Ellsworth, 1997), and that all people are social beings who construct knowledge as they “share experiences and develop ideas and understandings about what those experiences mean” (Thayer-Bacon, 1996, p. 466).

Methods

Practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003) and Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) were the methodologies used to explore the research question: What is the lived curriculum we have co-created at the Community School? Within this study I took up the role of teacher-researcher as well as portraitist. The school was the research site, and the daily practices, events, and student responses to those experiences were the focus of the study. Students, parents, extended families, teachers, and community members were regarded as knowers, learners, and researchers (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), and each of us have contributed to co-constructing knowledge about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in order to chronicle the lived journey of the Community School. As a methodology,
teacher research inspires “systemic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their school and classroom work” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 23) that provided space for me to explore how I/we theorize my/our work - the assumptions and decisions we made, and interpretations about student learning (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006).

Portraiture seeks to give expression to a person and their concerns by listening to and for their stories, and then painting a portrait of them with language (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) seeking "a text that [came] as close as possible to the realms of painting with words … [that] capture[s] the texture and nuance of human experience" (p.6). Rather than objectifying the subjects of study, portraiture seeks understanding and respectfully positions the subject as ‘thou’ (Buber, 1970). I attempted to capture the essence of each individual as a result of detailed and documented observations (artifacts, audio-recordings, field notes, journals, and photographs).

Throughout this inquiry, I drew on data from multiple sources. My methods have been inspired by the practices of Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1998), with particular attention to the concept of pedagogical documentation. This approach originated in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia after World War II. It was a movement towards child-centered education with an emphasis on relationships inspired by Dewey’s scholarship in the United States. Caldwell (1997) describes pedagogical documentation as a method to capture children’s learning experiences systematically through observations, transcriptions of interactions and analyses of artifacts, then share these with the learners through visual representations that provoke reflection. This research includes pedagogical documentation, which I have always found to be critical and integral in my teaching practice. Documentation methods included group gathering audio-recordings, classroom
artifacts, interviews, open-ended responses and student journal writing, photographs, field notes, and a research journal.

My intention through these methods was to make the many layers of my inquiry visible. As Afafara, Brown and Mangione (2002) write - “Indeed, a key part of qualitative research is how we account for ourselves, how we reveal that world of secrets. Good naturalistic inquiry shows the hand and opens the mind of the investigator to his or her reader” (p. 29). It is a fascinating process.

Data Sources

Context and Participants

The research involved the Community School - a program of fifty-six students, fifty-five parents, two teachers (taking up the role of pedagogues) and a student teacher (taking up the role of math and music mentor). All of these members were involved in the creation of this new school, have met with myself during the development process, and have been made aware that part of the mandate of the program is to co-create and document the activities of the program’s community of inquiry. This paper has been crafted drawing upon diverse forms of data to create thick description of actions, reflections, participants’ learnings and implications. Data collection and analysis operated both inductively (generating new theory) and deductively (testing theory) throughout.

Group Gatherings

I audio-recorded group gatherings that I sensed were ripe with potential critical discourse. This allowed me to be fully present and to participate during each gathering and in data analysis, it functioned to remind me of the complete conversations and not just what captured my attention. Audio recordings of group gatherings allowed for a
naturalistic gathering of data. I transcribed the recordings when the school year was over and reflected upon what I did and did not understand (dilemmas and contradictions), as well as those themes, patterns, and trends that occurred week to week. Only the data from the students who granted me permission is shared in this thesis.

**Student journals/Open-Ended Responses**

I selected 10 students who had given consent and who reflected diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences in the Community School and studied their responses to a variety of open-ended questions given throughout the year. This student chronicling of our lived experience at the Community School encouraged a “slowing down and being open to our impressions, living in the moment with a mindful stance—being ready to take in the world around us” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 91). The writing was gathered from:

- weekly responses on *FreshGrade* (a digital portfolio of reflective writing, artifacts, photographic and audio documentation)
- twice yearly (February and June) responses to *Examinations of Learning* (linked to the Core Competencies of the British Columbia Education Plan (2015))
- a year end writing provocation—“Describe the makings of VCS - what has it meant to you?” - published in a classroom magazine: *Voices*

This data provided me with an ongoing record of diverse student voices in relation to the Ministry Core Competencies. It allowed me “to bring out information [I] couldn’t learn without getting inside [my] students’ minds” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 100).
Having the data written down enabled me to read and reread deeply what each was saying, and then to ask clarifying questions if I was confused or uncertain. Emerging trends or patterns were noted during the inquiry through a coding process, and any student reflections, used within this paper, were taken directly from their writing (without editing).

**Field Notes/Research Journal**

Beginning day one, I kept a journal which included “in the midst” and “after the fact” field notes (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 121). This became a daily writing ritual for me. These notes are raw, with an intention to withhold judgment and to capture the experience with as many thick descriptions as I could. I noted such things as:

- how we spent our time
- the spirit of the group
- problem solving circles
- our conversations, interactions, play, and work
- my observations and active questioning of the students and the adults they interacted with (parents, teachers, administrators, mentors, community members, etc.)
- what I noticed about my inner world throughout the day (particularly on challenging, confusing, or frustrating days)

‘In the midst’ notes are those I made while the students were otherwise engaged. As Stafford (2003) suggests, I took “small things seriously: a glimpse, a flicker of recognition, an evocative phrase” (p. 4-5). ‘After the fact’ notes were written when the
students were not present (e.g., transitional breaks, afterschool, in the evening). These are much more reflective in nature as I noticed what stuck in my memory, craving attention and expression. Both perceived certainties and loose ends were explored.

Space was left in the field notes for memoing (Stafford, 2003), which provided me an opportunity to record another layer of observations and annotations, enhancing data exploration. Memoing offered me a context to consider theoretical viewpoints—exploring their role in illuminating the how, when, where, and why in the lived experience of the Community School.

This data provided a running record that is thick, elaborating on the lived experience of the Community School four times throughout the year. These linear notes were reread with memoing - fleshing out the raw data and coding themes, patterns, and narratives. The field notes/research journal also provided the backbone for the portraiture contained in my thesis.

**Classroom Artifacts**

Artifacts indicative of the lived experience at the Community School were gathered and analyzed throughout the course of this inquiry. This amassing, in fact, has always been an essential part of my teaching practice. It supports the storying of any learning community’s year together. These artifacts include such things as: growth continuums, content assessment continuums, project provocations, daily agendas (co-created with students), photographs (by adults and students), project presentations, student expressions (such as art, writing, photographs of temporary creations, email messages, notes or cards), newspaper articles about the Community School, and finally, notes from community or parent meetings.
Artifacts required critical questioning and provided all stakeholders “with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories” (Lubar & Kendrick, 2014). They also acknowledge that each artifact was embedded in a contextual story and embodied by a maker(s). Reflecting relational epistemology, Thayer-Bacon (1996) identifies “the interactive connection between social beings and ideas” (p.466). I considered this point of view in the process of analyzing the artifacts and included, as well, the voices of those constructors/creators as they reflected on their particular representation and why it seemed to be emblematic of the school’s journey.

This collection provided retrospective documentation of the journey our school had lived. This data also assisted with a public curation of the Community School that is thick in detail. I have amassed some of it for the public on the Community School blog (www.vernoncommunityschool.wordpress.com), as well as what was posted by parents, students and teachers on our secret Facebook site. These artifacts are “the touchstones that bring memories to life … and make history real” (Lubar & Kendrick, 2014).

**Critical Friends**

As co-creators of the Community School, Murray Sasges and I took up collaborative work in order to conceptualize the school and make a proposal to the school board long before a student crossed our threshold. As Hubbard & Power (1999) theorize - “If you investigate the work of any teacher-researcher who has sustained his or her work over time, you quickly see another person … standing in the shadows. Virtually all teacher-researchers depend on a partner … who shares their passions and provides reassurance when a project bogs down” (as cited in Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003, p. 50).
Murray has been a constant caring and critical friend in the researching of this inquiry question.

Never before have I collaborated so closely with another teacher. Never before have I worked with another whom I trusted and respected so completely either—“Members of the group respect each other’s points of view because they are bound by an ethic of caring, with its reference to each individual’s best teaching self” (Henderson, 1992, p. 109). We are definitely a team, choosing to be rooted in integrity by acknowledging the whole of who we are as individuals—both light and shadow, strengths and limitations (Palmer, 1998)—through good days and challenging ones. Thus grounded, we could move ahead and be responsibility bearers (Greenleaf, 1977) in taking up what the co-creation of the Community School has required of us professionally, pedagogically, personally, and ethically.

This relationship has strengthened and sustained me during the inaugural year of the Community School, and the challenge of whole-hearted and whole-minded curricular enactment situated within the opposing, dominant discourse of our district. Murray’s caring and critical friendship throughout the year provoked the opening of my pedagogical perspective - exposing my weaknesses and encouraging my strengths. I am deeply grateful for his model of patient steadfastness, the sharing of his wisdom and political astuteness, as well as his words of encouragement rooted in the sacred.

In addition, each month throughout the school year, Murray and I met with our university co-researchers, Dr. Leyton Schnellert and Dr. Margaret Macintyre Latta. Together we reflected upon those moments that “connote joy, ceremony, something special in experience” (Eisner, 2005, p. 105). We also expressed the tension found within
the multiplicity of experiences “that could be oppressive and depressive, marked by despair and hopelessness, and at other times, challenging and stimulating, evoking hopefulness for venturing forth” (Aoki, 2004, p. 162). This reflexivity provoked me to consider and reconsider how my inner world—feelings, experiences, biases, assumptions—was impacting my inquiry. The process provided clarity and understanding for my inquiry as emergent themes, patterns, and trends were articulated, interrogated, and re-articulated each month.

**Data Analysis**

Through the year’s inquiry, I engaged in an iterative process—reading and rereading journals, field notes, and artifacts; listening to the voices of students and teachers; having conversations with co-researchers to surface emergent themes provoking and guiding next steps in my research (Shagoury & Miller-Power, 2012; Schnellert, Butler & MacNeil, 2014). Three expansive cycles of the inductive process took place in the fall, winter, and spring with a more substantive cycle during summer break as I began the writing of this paper.

At the same time, the students participated in two expansive cycles of this inductive process—at the end of the first and second semesters (February and June). Instead of final exams, we met with small groups of students for two hours and examined our learning using descriptive continuums of growth (focused upon the core competencies of the British Columbia Education Plan (2015)). Parents were welcome to observe the process. In addition, the students undertook smaller weekly cycles of reflection throughout the year.
Portraits started to emerge as I listened deeply, and read thoughtfully and repeatedly during this reflective cycle - particularly during summer break from school with more time to devote to my inquiry alone. Portraits were initially shaped through dialogue between myself and my co-researchers, and then thickened or pruned in focus groups with those portrayed and their parent/guardians to ensure the most accurate portrait. This structure allowed for the disruption of the power relationship between student and teacher, providing openings for growth and transformation for all involved (including the future readers of the portraits).
4. The Community School–An Introduction

The Community School (VCS) began as a school of fifty-six students in grades 7 to 9. It is considered ‘a school within a school,’ and is situated within a traditional high school comprised of grades 8 to 12 with 650 students. VCS is the first educational setting of its kind in our school district: an academy (following the British Columbia Education Plan (2015)) that is free and inclusive of all learners–taking up the newly conceived British Columbia Education Plan (2015). VCS is nested in a space that historically was a drafting room and, later, a computer lab. It has a high ceiling, an assemblage of mismatched furniture, and a wall of windows looking onto a courtyard, which is home to a greenhouse, circular gardens, and a collection of drama props and athletic equipment. The walls of the room curate images from the past year: of students, of mentors, of projects, of beliefs. Everywhere you look, there are creative tools, materials and mediums. The most distinctive feature of the space is a handmade gift from a community maker—a sizable structure of cardboard boxes on wheel, cubbies for individual students to personalize as well as stow their belongings.

We chose to begin the year with a daily rhythm rather than a set timetable. This flexible structure opened up space and time to become acquainted with the fifty-six students, as we attended to and reflected on the most educative and productive use of our days together. We proposed the following rhythm on a chalkboard in the classroom and made reference to it in the movement of our days:

- Enter & Greet
- Gather & Check-in
- Provocation (challenge, stimulus, project) & Presentation
• Eat
• Reflection & Assessment
• Clean-up
• Farewell

Beside it we left space for students to write their questions, comments, feedback and concerns, as well as a suggestion to eat, hydrate or use the washroom throughout the day at their own discretion—listening to the particular needs of their bodies and unlearning structures that conditioned them to ignore their internal rhythms.

We set this tone of proposal making from the very first day. It was our intention to model to the students that despite the fact that we, the teachers, generated the initial rhythm, we believed that each member of the VCS community had a valid and valuable point of view. Through these many points of view, we would discover what rhythm works best for the Community School as a whole. We wondered if one rhythm should be the objective anyways?

**Enter & Greet**

Students entered the room informally the hour before school began—8:30 am. Because individuals came from all over the school district, most did not know each other so the conversation for the first few weeks was awkward. Many students played games on their phones or read. The space was quite quiet. As acquaintances developed, books and screens were more often put away. The chatter increased as connections were made, stories were told, frustrations were aired. This morning transitional time remained vibrant throughout the year; students who did not interact much with each other throughout the formal school day had a quieter and more private social space to take some risks.
Gather & Check-in

Each morning as the high school’s morning announcements came on, prompting students to move to classes, the Community School gathered into a circle. Benches, chairs, couches, cushions, tables were dragged into a circle-ish shape. The morning circle was a time to check in on the feelings or mood of individuals—acknowledging the multiplicity of inner lives. Some gave a word or phrase; others told long and elaborate narratives of their morning adventures. On the very first day, Murray and I initiated the discussion by explaining the ancient wisdom of the circle, and its significances to us.

Students, who had already studied with me at the local elementary school for grade 6 and/or 7 in a class called the Ozone, affirmed our perspective by sharing their lived experiences of the circle’s value. This set a tone that it had deep and embedded value and was not to be critiqued. By November, students began to take up the responsibility for facilitating the circle, for morning checking in and even for solving interpersonal problems. Again, it was those students with prior experience who did this first, with others following their lead. Over the course of the year, the circle protocol was questioned and challenged, adjusted and contextualized; the vulnerability and discipline it required was voiced as too rigorous for some. It remains, however, the school’s framework.

Morning circle was also the time that Murray and I explored our observations about what living together in a classroom could mean, sometimes setting expectations, challenging assumptions, or exploring students’ past experiences in school. Emerging topics were discussed, such as:

- If teachers aren’t bylaw officers, then what?
• Who has authority?
• What does a democratic space look like?
• What do I do if I’m a minority voice?
• What do I do if I’m too afraid to speak?
• How do we solve problems large and small?
• Do we need to fundraise?
• How do we go about finding mentors?

In November students also began to use the morning circle as a time to make announcements for upcoming meetings, presentations or opportunities, as well as the occasion when community members were invited to come in and pitch their ideas for collaborative action. Murray and I also came to use the circle throughout the day as the transitional space between activities. The freedom of the school made us aware of a need to gather the students in from the plurality of learning opportunities throughout the day. The students learned that after breaks, it made sense to gather in the circle so we could all be reminded of the day’s rhythm.

**Provocation (challenge, stimulus, project) & Presentation**

Our intention was to stimulate learning by providing experiences in a multiplicity of contexts: the classroom, the virtual world, the natural world outside the school and the greater community. We were not sure how two teachers would manage fifty-six students in these different places; we imagined mentors, parent helpers and self-directed learners. After a bicycle trip to the community library to test out our cycling, social, and research skills, it became apparent that very few students were ready for this kind of freedom. Resultantly, until February, when we received additional daily support from a teaching
assistant, we spent most of our time with inquiries or projects engaged in the classroom, the school, the virtual world, and, at times, the natural world. We invited the community to visit us instead, and had nearly 40 mentors from all different walks of life offer their gifts, talents and passions to the students. Some mentors came weekly throughout the year, some could commit to a 4-6 week cycle, and others came for a half-day workshop. Unsure of how the mentors and students would work together, and not wanting to put strain on the mentoring relationship, we chose not to include a presentation expectation; it was a lived experience alone. We trusted that the multiplicity of learnings would spill over and stimulate the overall growth and development of each student.

Our first inquiry provocation, begun in late September as a result of a teacher’s strike extending the summer pause, grew out of the need to become acquainted with each other to unearth some particularities of each community member (personalities, stories, perspectives). Entitled An Examination of YOU, it asked students—What kinds of fruit do you offer the world? What are your strengths, talents, gifts, desires? How are you vulnerable? What are your needs, weaknesses, challenges, wounds? After a week of reflection and self analysis, each student stood in front of the community and, in whatever way each chose to, shared their discoveries.

In the Ozone, one of the protocols that had significantly shaped its ecology was the process of asking for feedback whenever an inquiry was presented or a pitch was proffered. This process was naturally taken up and modeled at the Community School by those students from the Ozone. Within this movement were the following interrogated and practiced assumptions that nurtured the habit:
• Feedback is a gift. It is not an attack. No one is perfect. We need each other to grow and learn.

• Each of us has a point of view. By asking others for their perspectives, your point of view is stretched, your thinking develops—whether the feedback is additive or not. In addition, the audience is nudged to uncover their points of view—to actively engage their mind during the presentation by listening deeply (to think critically, creatively and reflectively) rather than simply hearing (to retell). It was expected that over time all would develop the capacity to offer feedback.

• A wise person weighs and considers feedback—even questions it by engaging in dialogue with another—but does not dismiss it or defend oneself from it.

This process became an unexpected rhythm of the Community School from the outset; and the students, teachers, parents, and mentors were empowered by the process.

Our second inquiry in November was intended to invite curiosity into the space, deepen relationships and self knowledge, as well as stimulate thinking. The provocation was to gather a group who shared a burning question about the world, and then to research it and present the findings to the class. The presentations could take any shape that the group felt was most effective for teaching others.

The next two inquiry challenges took up the Social Studies and Science content, with the focus being on helping others learn about your discoveries. Students were encouraged to collaborate with those who had complementary capacities. The students were familiar with each other by January; Murray and I felt they could make wise
decisions in this regard.

To finish the year, the students were given an individual writing provocation—to choose some aspect of the makings of VCS that they would like to explore and explain. The polished pieces were published in the Community School’s Voices magazine.

Reflection & Assessment

Believing that reflection upon experience is when deep and layered learning occurs, we provided a variety of structures for reflective thinking opportunities. Within circle conversations, reflective questions were often posed to the community; some students took them up, others listened to the dialogue, a few shut down, neither speaking nor listening. This was a time of promoting hospitality, all thoughts and perspectives were welcome, explored, and wrestled with. To promote safety and a quieting of inner critics, judgment was re-formed as descriptive feedback. We spoke of the wisdom in the room as a reminder that together we could figure out how to untangle ideas, challenges, provocations. This both affirmed the initiators and called the listeners to share their unique, particular viewpoints with the group because without their voices, our collective understanding was not as complete as it could be.

Individual reflective thought was provoked and attended to in teachable moments throughout the day. At first it was by the teachers alone, but by November we could hear students posing questions to each other about their opinions, about their actions, about their choices or lack thereof. We tried to be mindful of the differences that seem to exist between extroverts and introverts, finding times throughout the week to deliberately engage with each learner individually.

As the year progressed, we also became aware that by privileging oral
communication, students with shortcomings in this area needed visual support; graphically capturing group and individual reflection became part of our rhythm. These images were photographed and posted on individual digital portfolios for future reference or further contemplation.

More formal reflections—*Examinations of Learning*—happened twice in the year, coinciding with the traditional high school exam schedule. Small groups (8-10) of students gathered around a large table and documented their growth of Core Competencies - a new aspect of the British Columbia Education Plan (2015), “Core competencies are sets of intellectual, personal, social and emotional proficiencies that all students need to develop in order to engage in deep learning and life-long learning” (Ministry of Education, 2014). The facilitated conversation and personal documentation was guided by a growth continuum designed by Murray Sasges and me, employing the conceptual framework offered by the Ministry. Students were asked to imagine themselves as seeds—developing from pod to eventual fruiting—in a variety of aspects of the Competencies. These examinations were scheduled for two hours and parents were invited to observe the process. In addition, the thoughts and insights gleaned from these examinations were used to write anecdotal reports of each student’s growth and development. Through consultation and subsequent agreement among teachers, parents, school and district administration, letter grades were not used as part of our reporting process.
5. Portraits

After a year of intense living, data collection, and iterative reflecting, I stopped in July, and oriented my mind toward meaning making, becoming attuned to my research question: What is the lived curriculum we have co-created at the Community School? Nested in my warm backyard, surrounded by piles of papers and books, I searched and re-searched for emerging patterns, reading and rereading journals and field notes, studying photographs, and listening to audio recordings. It was a challenge to discern - What pieces do I attend to? What do I benignly neglect? What dialogues, whose stories, help to answer my question? What dialogues, whose stories, important as they may seem, are not yet ready to be told? Like an archeological dig, the workings of the Community School were unearthed layer by layer, fragment by fragment: particular voices and narratives, distinct emotional experiences, reoccurring themes - “encountering, negotiating, studying and articulating the relational complexities” (Macintyre Latta & Wunder, 2012, p.10). This methodical process revealed to me the necessity of stepping back to reflect on and discern what stories to tell.

Through a careful reading of my field notes, I noticed that the majority of students came to the Community School because they and/or their parents were unhappy with some aspect of the dominant discourse in education: a negative sense of self; feeling stupid or worthless; being told what to do and how to think; rigid environments; and bullying (student reflections, June 2015). The parents were seeking difference for their children, or perhaps themselves. For most, the vision of the Community School was like Kessler’s (2000) hope of inspiration and illumination, in which she argues for the absolute importance of welcoming and attending to the unique inner life of each learner in the
classroom, where: “The yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students become central to the curriculum. Questions become as important as answers” (p. x).

Placed in a new environment, a few students began to thrive immediately—the past was gladly left behind, and the new was engaged. Perhaps the Community School reminded them of ecologies where they were already rooted, such as family, community groups, or spiritual communities. These fecund individuals took advantage of openings, provocations, and opportunities throughout the year—leading committees, bringing up issues, sharing their perspectives. They were active and committed, emerging into their individuality and independence (Neufeld, 2004). They inspired and challenged us, and “through them the entire spirit of the school [was] renewed” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 13).

Others, deeply conditioned by schooling beliefs, would critically discuss them, but live as though the dominant discourse was right and true: letter grades define your value; if you have freedom you will slack and end up failing; without a teacher telling you what to do and you doing it, you will fail (student reflections, June 2015). I noticed the irony early on in my inquiry that those who had hated those messages and defied them in their past classrooms, still held onto them tightly. In my journal, I frequently expressed how frustrating this dynamic was. Sometimes, confused by the students themselves, a reverential stance of patient listening became very difficult. I couldn’t make sense of how they could be so hurt by something and yet so defended against letting it go and developing their own ideas and dreams.

The Freirian (1993) lens unveiled some meaning for me—
But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. At this level, their perception of
themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole (p. 27-28).

Dewey (2001) provides another perspective: “activities may get agreeable if long enough persisted in” (p. 121). So, we continued to invite these students into a new ecology that did not include letter grades, but provided non-judgmental, descriptive feedback; believed in the ethics of freedom; cared about hearing each voice; and defined success as the taking up of things. This process was iterative, invitational, supportive, and with expectations deemed fitting for each learner.

The shadow cast by the past was difficult to shake however; some of these students left during the year, some began to respond, others will not be returning next school year—turning back to the very environment they criticized. I asked myself and my teaching partner all year (and will continue next year)—how do we create a safe place for these students to put away the known and try on something new? How do we move the center of gravity from outside the child to “the immediate instincts and activities of the child itself” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 23)? We have come to call this restorative process unlearning: unlearning passivity, dependency and the blind sticking to tradition /1902).

Other students were tentative and cautious in this new environment—definitely curious, but holding back. My journal is full of wonderings. During one on one conversations, these students would tell me that they were tired of their work being criticized by teachers, frustrated that teachers were always right, or saddened that they didn’t belong at school. Tears often formed in their eyes; they were not defensive, but sad. They seemed to have responded to the dominant discourse by shutting down at school—
unwilling to experiment, explore or express. Both they and their parents would report creative risk taking and the playing with new ideas at home. It took specific attention and effort to discern the way to draw each out: “Such emergence has a tentative and timid character, like a turtle sticking its head out of a shell. To venture forth in all our naked originality is to be totally exposed to the reactions of others” (Neufeld & Mate, 2004, p. 124). I followed their leads—no matter how small, no matter how tenuous, considering what provocations could stimulate these children—“Only by watching the child and seeing the attitude that he [sic] assumes toward suggestions can we tell whether they are operating as factors in furthering the child’s growth” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 81). Only in reviewing my journals do I see the ongoing development—however diminutive. I am thankful for trusting in mystery, despite not always believing that growth was occurring.

Fifty-six students are enrolled in the Community School. Over the first year of operation, four students’ narratives of experience repeatedly called my attention. Each of these narratives reveals a unique individual and their specific contributions to VCS. And, concomitantly, each of these narratives echoes and amplifies larger themes permeating VCS as a whole. Again and again, I also keep finding within each of these narratives of experience, reflections of myself - confronting, challenging, and strengthening my identity as an educator. I have come to see these four narratives as illuminating the makings of VCS. Thick descriptions of each narrative of experience have taken shape through the detailed storytelling drawing across my documented observations of the students over the year, including artifacts of learning, audio-recordings, journals and field notes, and photographs.
Melissa’s story

The scribbled field note jumps out at me: she entered the room hunched over—caringly attended to by another. That day I was doing the entrance interviews for the Community School alone, and for me, this interview was significantly different than the rest. “Melissa?” I ask trying to gently break the ice as two figures enter the classroom space. “I’m Ellen, Melissa’s Grandmother, and this is Melissa,” she gestures to the tuft of thick hair as I have not yet seen her face. “Hello. Come on in and have a seat.” Ellen assists Melissa, and then Melissa looks up at me—I am taken aback by the red eyes and red swollen face. “She is very upset Kim. While we waited in the hallway, Melissa told me about all the bullying that has been going on at school. She only just told me. I didn’t know.” Melissa awkwardly nods and tears continue to stream. Carrying this heavy burden must be agonizing—I wrote. I wasn’t sure how to handle the intense emotion I was experiencing. I tried to attend to the tension of the situation, asking myself: Is it fair to interview a young woman who is obviously in distress? Yet, is it fair to dismiss her because she isn’t able to speak in this painful moment? Murray and I imagine the Community School as a safe place to grow, a place that Melissa seems to need more than any other candidate we had interviewed thus far. At the same time, Murray and I were on a very short timeline. Tension.

The Community School was approved by the Board of School Trustees in December 2013 after a lengthy, circuitous and arduous process supported primarily by a handful of parents, community members led by Annette Sharkey of Vernon’s Social Planning Council, and by Dr. Leyton Schnellert, a professor in the faculty of education at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus. We were approved with the
caveat that we have fifty-six students by February 15; it seemed to me an impossibility at the time. Murray and I were respected educators in Vernon, each having taught there for over a decade, but our innovative ideas had not been shared in any significant way with the other twenty schools or the community at-large. In addition, the school site had not yet been selected, so we had no idea where VCS would be situated. There was a lot to be imagined and trusted at this point, so it was truly astonishing when over two hundred people gathered for an introduction to the school in mid January, with over one hundred and twenty students applying. We knew the community was responsive to the vision of VCS—we just had no idea how interested they actually were; the tipping was fast and furious. I had wet eyes for most of that gathering with my arms wrapped in knots around my body—holding in my joy. These were soulful moments as I caught “a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek” (Palmer, 2000, p.8).

Both applicants and their parents were interviewed, first online and then in person, in an attempt to help them understand:

• some of the challenges inherent in experimental and innovative settings
• their commitment to the first year of co-creating the school
• how different teaching and learning may look like in this context

Students at the Community School are diverse in many ways and come from all over the District.

Return with me to that moment heavy-laden with sadness - “I’m sorry that you are feeling so upset today Melissa. It hurts so much to be treated badly by others—to not be accepted.” Tentatively, I move my chair around and sit beside her, my hand gently
touching her back. She looked up. Again, I make note of the agitation emanating from her face.

“I want you to know that at the Community School we will not allow people to be mistreated. That’s very important to Murray and I.” Her gaze held. I noticed and continued - “Also, we will not be encouraging people to feel sorry for themselves—to get lost in their sadness. It is our desire to give each student a voice and a circle where they can share their feelings and how others are impacting them.” I attend to Melissa’s response. She looked afraid. Ellen was provoked—

“What do you mean ‘feel sorry for themselves’?” I appreciated her advocacy. I had already experienced this tension many times before as I explained my philosophy to frustrated parents.

“Well, at the Community School we won’t be punishing students for unkindnesses.” I paused expecting Ellen’s cringe. “Murray and I will not be bylaw officers. Instead, each person in the Community School will be held accountable for their actions. This is more important to us than anything else—spelling, math—anything.” Ellen nodded. Melissa looked exhausted. “I’ve taught for a long time and know that it’s possible to create a place where this can actually happen. I have zero tolerance for people being mean to others.” I could not sense whether Melissa understood this message. Mindful of the emotional toll the process had on Melissa, however, I invited them to reschedule another interview - “We will definitely find another time for you.” I assumed correctly; they both nodded appreciatively.

*I ask myself:* Did Melissa find the safety at the Community School that I promised? What did she bring to the co-created process in particular? How does
Melissa’s story contribute to my understanding of the living of curriculum at the Community School? As student voice is deeply valued and resultantly encouraged at VCS, I’ve chosen to use Melissa’s words to describe her beginnings. hooks (1994) affirms this act—“To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition” (p. 41). At the end of the year (June 2015), students in the Community School wrote reflective commentaries; Melissa’s piece immediately conjures up the past:

From when I was little to when I grew older, school and friends were always a big problem for me. I was always alone and would be called names because of my appearance. I was the misfit, the one that seemed to never fit in. I would always see the other girls and think—“Why couldn’t I be more like them and fit in at least for a day at normal school?” I never got to figure out my true personality. I was always covered with shyness to hide what I truly felt. I thought that if I said my opinion, I would get made fun of. Everyday I came to school in fear and couldn’t wait until the final bell rang to get out of the prison. I thought I would never get out of there (student reflection, June 2015).

Vulnerability, or the energy to open up and move into the new, is fundamental to education - “Genuine learning means that you’re willing to be very vulnerable. So it means that I can say ‘I don’t know’” (Macintyre Latta, 2015). This dynamic is a critical part of being human; we are always in the process of being and becoming, and only in this process is change possible (Vanier, 1979). How could a child who had experienced significant oppression at school remain open, open to learning, open to others, open
enough to even take the risk of applying to a new and different school with new and different teachers? Melissa explains:

There was a glint of hope—none other than the Community School. At first, I didn’t really know what the glint of hope was going to give me. What was I going to get out of that little tiny light? I knew that shine was not going to stay there forever, so I decided to take a risk and try this new hope that came into my life. I have to say, I didn’t really know what I was expecting, but I had to try. Maybe it would bring me good things or bad things (student reflection, June 2015).

Is belonging such a powerful need (Maslow, 1943) that Melissa was willing to risk rejection even if the possibility of acceptance was small? With wonder, I wrote—“Melissa’s courage is astounding - we could have said no.” Melissa did, after all, have the advantage of a strong parent substitute who carries herself with substantial confidence “rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (Noddings, 2003, p. 2). Ellen also stood by Melissa’s side throughout the application process: from introductory meeting to online interview, then two face-to-face interviews, and finally a commitment to transporting Melissa across town to VCS each day.

My journal reminds me that Melissa entered the classroom very early each morning—dropped off by the first bus. She would sit quietly, and I was unsure if she wanted to be left alone or nudged into relating. Experience had taught me that some students need time and space to open up, while others yearn to be called into action. I had no intuitive sense of which one fit Melissa, and so I greeted her warmly each day, and then watched and waited. My journal and several photographs also remind me that Melissa began to naturally interact with Marley—a tall, handsome, articulate young man—
who would also enter the classroom space before anyone else arrived. I made note of his baritone voice and her quiet giggle. It was a sweet relationship that developed over time. I minded my business, not wanting to interfere in such tentative growth, yet attending to what was emerging from their friendship. Dewey (1938) describes this process:

> it is my business to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction I must, if I am an educator, be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. I must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives me an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning (p. 39).

I tried to pay attention to the inner strain between my enthusiasm to verbally encourage their friendship and wisdom that whispered “hold” so Melissa and Marley could learn about and from each other in comfort (Rud, 1995) without my interference. Interestingly, my journal notes that as new students entered the room each morning, Melissa and Marley moved apart; Marley more gregariously engaging with others and Melissa returning to her quiet, attentive gazing.

Seeking a deeper understanding of Melissa for myself, I eagerly awaited her self-study presentation in early October. I choose not to read school files until after a relationship is established between a student and I; it has been my experience that teacher reports have more to do with the student’s response to the ecology of the classroom and relationship to the teacher than facts that can be generalized in a new context, and so I wait. One of the first presenters, name drawn from a hat, Melissa moved to the stage meekly—head down, nervous smile. With a confident voice, however, she shared how her
name was chosen because it means *Holy City* in Bosnian. She glanced at the audience. An only child, she added that she didn’t live with her mom or see her dad very often. She told the story of a series of traumatic family events involving abandonment that led her to permanently take up residence and be cared for by her maternal grandmother, Ellen.

Photographs remind me of the sacred silence in the classroom during the presentation—over fifty teenagers completely rapt. Melissa talked of her love of text and music in Kindergarten. In grade one, she said, her report card stated that she talked and sang too much in class, so she submitted and accepted “imposition from above and from outside” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18). She was stoic as she shook her bowed head, evidently dismayed by the residue of judgment. *I wondered:* Was that message carefully appraised by the grade one teacher and reflective of a personal preference for quiet that follows a traditional mindset? Had the teacher been aware of the critical nature of those words to the narrowing of Melissa’s future development - “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Was the teacher even aware of Melissa’s familial challenges and how trauma impacts learning? Or was Melissa simply singing too loudly and disturbing other children? This was hard to imagine *now.*

A documented conversation (email) with Ellen substantiated Melissa’s claims, as well as illuminating some early life experiences:

From when Melissa was two and a half she moved back and forth from her mother's home to mine until the beginning of grade three. I am sure there was no physical or verbal abuse, but likely some neglect. She had great separation anxiety. When she was young, Melissa could get very upset and angry and voiced
this by very loud screaming and temper tantrums. She fared well, though, at the daycare where she attended until Kindergarten. The first occasion of concern that comes to mind is when Melissa was in Kindergarten. At that time of her young life, I was concerned that she may have a learning disability, just by the way she processed information slowly and her reluctance to speak out in the company of others. I mentioned this to the teacher and her response was that it could be possible. About one month later, we communicated again and this time the teacher said that she could not have been more wrong. I also remember that Melissa was quite happy in this class and was brave enough to sing an Easter song in front of her classmates. Yes, in grade one, she was told not to sing, that it was disturbing the other children. In hindsight, this was probably the beginning of her becoming a model student in order not to be reprimanded (personal communication, January 17, 2016).

Ellen noted, as well, the continuation of this pattern of quiet cooperation throughout her elementary report cards, as well as a growing sense of social exclusion:

I feel she learnt to be quiet and polite as a way to be accepted at least by the teachers and become somewhat invisible. I think some of her teachers had an idea that she was struggling with friendships and did try to help her but not in a meaningful way (personal communication, January 17, 2016).

Melissa expressed this dynamic herself – “I guess you could say I was the teacher’s pet–good student, well behaved, good grades–but no one knew who I was inside. I was shunned because of my appearance” (personal communication, January 22, 2016).
The impact these early experiences had and continued to have on Melissa six years later was significant - no more singing, no more sharing - “I don’t know what I think or who I am. I spend a lot of time surviving” (student reflection, December 2015). Perry, et al (1995) identify this state as a surrender response and as a result “elements of true emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social potential are diminished - some percentage of capacity is lost, a piece of the child is lost forever” (p. 285). I had witnessed this in the VCS community. Melissa was mute during community conversations in the fall and unwilling to take up learning opportunities in small groups with mentors. Only with Marley did she seem comfortable, open, at ease. I wondered: How will the Community School help Melissa to sing again? How can we, like Dewey (1938), promote “desirable future experiences” (p. 27) that are “in harmony with principles of growth” (p. 30) for Melissa? What might experiences look like for her that “arouse curiosity, strengthen initiative, and set up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future” (Dewey, 1938, p. 38)?

Melissa’s self study presentation provoked and helped me to understand her history, some of her experiences, and the resultant implications. It also reminded me of why I had put so much effort into the co-creation of the Community School; creating spaces of belonging has always been a central focus of my teaching practice.

Trying to make sense of Melissa’s experience in school, I explored in my journal how education’s dominant discourse often compares educating children to home construction – a linear and controllable process. I consider Eisner’s (2005) description of common curriculum and prescription that neglects “student idiosyncrasy and aptitude differences by assuming that in curricular matters one size fits all” (p. 105). I imagine
this: the contractor (teacher) receives design plans from an architect (curriculum guides or professional books) and then begins clearing the land, laying the foundation without asking who in particular will be living here? What does he or she need? To privilege any one-way of knowing or thinking or being minimizes the others.

As hooks (2003) magnifies - “Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity” (p. 197). To privilege one kind of person and their experiences, therefore, diminishes others. To privilege one aspect of curricular enactment—academic achievement, and ignore others, such as attention to process, identity formation or social interaction - is not even in alignment with British Columbia curriculum guides dating back to 1990. Melissa’s early years provoke me to ask: Why silence? Why not singing? Who decides? The complex world in which we find ourselves requires people with diverse gifts, strengths and experiences to sustain life in all its manners and forms. Melissa’s experiences in school, as well as her early years, had most certainly helped to alienate her from herself and from others. As a result, her growth and development had been interrupted.

With the desire to co-create an ecology that supported the learning and growth of Melissa and her peers, Murray and I began the year wide-awake to the intention of cultivating vulnerability, honesty, emotional safety, and oral communication in VCS–to look, Greene (1995) beckons, for openings, for possibilities, with a movement in quest and in pursuit (p. 15). We imagined, like Vanier (1998), that becoming fully human involves the cultivation of gifts, as well as being “open to others, to look at them not with a feeling of superiority but with eyes of respect” (p. 3). Our stance, however, was not one of complacency or coddling (Freire, 1996) and early on I documented that Melissa was
looking for this kind of relationship, attracted to adults in our space who protected her and spoke for her, which makes sense given her extensive experience of teacher pleasing. Instead, Murray and I viewed our work as teachers through the lenses of advocate, and pedagogue as conceptualized by van Manen (1994) - “an educator … who understands children in a caring way, and who has personal commitment and interest in children’s education and their growth toward mature adulthood” (p. 139).

As we intentionally and explicitly tried to live in these ways with our students, Melissa noticed:

The travelers I was with on this quest were Kim and Murray. They were there to help me if I got lost. They would guide me to the right path, but they weren’t going to cuddle me. When I got bruises they supported me and they would help me through the mountains and rivers—the fear and the pain. I had to trust them. They were the glint of light that started me going through this journey and I knew that they would stick with me until the very end. I trusted them to take me (student reflection, June 2015).

*I wondered:* How was this trust growing within Melissa? What was in the ecology of the Community School that provoked the risk-taking that trust depends upon? Curating my journals and photographs as I ponder these questions, I am struck by the recurring telling of stories from the heart rooted in vulnerability. It didn’t take long at VCS for these to begin pouring out of the students. The first powerful tale was told to the entire class only weeks into the year.

After an exploration of Indian Residential Schools immediately after summer break, a student passionately asserted that he had nothing to do with those policies or
practices, and so how were the outcomes his problem to solve now. My journal reminds me how Murray stepped into this opening and shared a very personal tale of familial abuse that he had somehow been spared from in his large family. Aloud, he wondered if his sister’s depression and loneliness was his to worry about now, despite the fact the perpetrator was dead. He complicated for the students the notion that we can tend to our own business while others around us suffer. He introduced the conceptions of interconnectedness, interdependence and empathy to personal, familial and national realities. Students and visiting parents sat spellbound—enrapt, engaged, silent—myself included.

In my journal, I made note of the power that stories full of emotion like Murray’s have in the classroom - “Emotion is very important to the educative process because it drives attention, which drives learning and memory” (Sylwester, 1995, p. 72 as cited in Kessler, 2000, p. xv). Ask any learner at the Community School who heard Murray’s story that day and I imagine that they can recall some part of the experience. I still wonder about its profundity and how it stimulated growth: for the breaking of silence, for the expression of weakness, for the acknowledgement of complexity in human relating, for the living of tension that is reconciliation. Melissa reflects:

I remember it [Murray’s story]. I felt shocked and sad. He seemed like he had it all together, and then he told that story. He’s been through rough patches. It would not be a nice feeling. His story kinda opened something up in me that made me realize “okay, it’s not only me.” It showed me different paths, I guess - different lives that people have had. It gave me more confidence to talk about my
own life. I kinda wanted to talk about my story (personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Days after Murray’s provocation, a visitor to VCS, having witnessed several presentations and the subsequent peer feedback, commented - “You’ve created a culture of safety and they don’t even know each other’s names” (personal communication, October 7, 2014). This echoes Kessler’s (2000) observation - “I felt the room relax as I named and honoured their suffering” (p. 3). With impeccable attendance, Melissa experienced every story, every interaction, each conflict that arose at VCS. Captured on film, she was quiet, focused and deeply engaged throughout, often quieting the rambunctious with a gentle and firm “shhhh.” She didn’t want to miss anything. I wonder: Was it because “To name something is to bring it out of chaos, out of confusion, and to render it understandable” (Vanier, 1998, p. 25), and Melissa was waking up (Greene, 1995)?

I kinda wanted to share what I’ve been through - confidence and permission. You know in traditional schools you don’t talk about things that are bad in that way. Teachers tell you to keep the hard stories closed off. A gate slowly opened after that [Murray’s story] and I got comfortable with the telling of personal stories because people were learning to trust each other. It’s nice to kinda get it out - for me. I never had really told my feelings prior to that. It felt nice” (personal communication, January 22, 2016).

In the context of a personal story like this and the others that followed, Melissa was invited to accept her own weakness as she listened to and reflected on others’ experiences. This is a context that invites learning since the listener is not directly
implicated in the narrative and is therefore calm and relaxed – “By listening to other’s stories, I think I learn a lot about myself and what others think. I used to feel nervous because I thought people would judge me and sharing something about me felt vulnerable. I feel okay to share now” (student reflection, November 2014). This perspective is substantiated by neuroimaging studies of human beings – “Being able to hover calmly and objectively over our thoughts, feelings, and emotions (an ability I’ll call mindfulness) and then take our time to respond allows the executive brain to inhibit, organize, and modulate the hardwired automatic reactions preprogrammed into the emotional brain” (Van der kolk, 2015, p. 62). Melissa concurs – “It was really hard at first (to share my strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities), but after when I saw how everybody was paying attention, it just made it a lot easier for me especially when I started to tell my wounds” (student reflection, October 2014).

It’s astonishing to more fully realize how critical honesty is in the development of a rich ecology of learning—educating as Greene (1988) aspires “with untapped possibility in mind” (p. xii). As I study photographs, listen to audio recordings, and read my journal entries and field notes, I am able to see this movement of authentic and layered stories inspiriting individuals and the greater community. hooks (1994) explains – “Hearing each other’s voices, individual thoughts, and sometimes associating these voices with personal experience makes us more acutely aware of each other” (p. 186). This risk taking, this exposure of aspects of her life previously hidden, had a powerful impact on Melissa.

Photographs help me to remember that on the first Passion Night in November, Melissa surprised Murray and I by performing a contemporary dance with a small group
of peers for an audience of parents and community members. Images also remind me that Melissa began to stick up for others when she felt they were not being treated respectfully. She was serious and assertive, speaking with empathy and anger; her voice was emerging - “It was awkward. I had never really expressed deep feelings before - a habit from my whole life. When I did it, I felt relief. I was slightly worried. I was thinking of all the possibilities that might happen, that could come out wrong” (personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Turning now to an analysis of Melissa’s writing, I notice that the tone and content began to change as life was lived at VCS. In November, Melissa expressed feeling shy and anxious about judgment and vulnerability. In December, she wrote -“some confidence was built in me just by being in the classroom and not being judged for what I say. I am learning how to express my emotions” (student reflection, December 2014). January’s reflection reveals emerging self-awareness and social understanding - “For me to be comfortable and safe, my [classmates] shouldn’t be judgmental about what I do or how I look. Also, my [classmates] need to accept all of me, no matter what I bring” (student reflection, January 2015).

My journal also documents Marley as a vital support for Melissa once again. At the first “Examination of Learning”, at the end of January, around a table of ten peers, Melissa expressed that she didn’t know what she was good at - “I have no idea,” she mumbled lowering her head and shrugging her shoulders when it was her turn to share. Marley quickly took this up - “So, here, I have an idea. Why don’t we go around the circle and say what we think Melissa is good at,” he asserted with enthusiasm and thoughtfulness—surprising for the macho young “surfer dude” who described himself as
chill and cool every morning at circle check-in no matter his actual mood. Melissa smiled and nodded her head joyfully. The others followed Marley’s lead and provided many descriptive examples of Melissa’s strengths; it was obvious that they had been paying attention. Marley looked satisfied. Melissa reflects -

Marley has been a role model - in a leadership type way. He stands alone, but he’s bold. I feel like he gained respect from some people in the classroom. He gained my respect by helping me rise in a way; his attention gave me value. He’s really unique, actually, as a young man. He’s pretty popular in the classroom and I guess, in a way, I kinda felt special that he gave me attention. He’s charming and so he gets a lot of attention. It’s just nice that he helped me out. Just talking about it right now brings up emotions like joy - and reflecting makes me appreciate him (personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Melissa continued to develop an awareness of what stimulated and hindered her growth, exemplified in February when she asserted - “My confidence has grown and just being accepted has made me grow. I need to work on saying what I think and take risks more and not try to worry about what other people think. I need help with my inner critic” (Examination of Learning, February 4, 2015). By June, Melissa’s voice had become more assertive and certain - “I have definitely grown in confidence. I have come out of my shell and have expressed more of who I am. I’ve learned how to ask for things” (student reflection, June 2015). In addition, she was willing to express areas of vulnerability - demonstrating growing awareness and courage - “I want to grow in taking risks and working on friendships and not being socially awkward - trying not to shut down in bad
situations. Maybe also express myself more and not enclose myself and be more vulnerable” (student reflection, June 2015).

Images from the end of June remind me of the Red Carpet Gathering that celebrated the culmination of the Community School’s first year of enactment. Usually shying away from photographs, Melissa’s personage is found in many images - standing with peers, standing alone, standing with her grandmother—still on the edge, but now, smiling and leaning in. Melissa radiates happiness and pride in a strapless dress of floral silk with a wisp of vibrant pink in her hair. She stood on a stage in front of many parents, community mentors, and teachers honouring a peer with confident words and a shiny medallion; in return, she was honoured for her contributions to the making of VCS. As the formal program was coming to a close, before the food and dancing, a small group moved onto the stage. These were the students most passionate about music; they had spent the month of June mentored by our teacher candidate Danica, a self-taught and astonishingly powerful chanteuse. I was not aware of their work together; I was engaged and distracted by those curious and enthusiastic about community service. Danica offers a window into their experience:

When I first heard Melissa singing to herself quietly, I was honestly quite floored at her talent. A lot of the strategies I tried to use during our singing time were geared toward making singers like Melissa more likely to step out and shine. I don't take the credit for Melissa's courage, though. The group, specifically Marley, was extremely responsive to her voice, giving her loads of positive vibes and support. During practices, Melissa's confidence grew, but she sometimes shut
down in the middle of something if she realized that she was the only voice that people could hear.

When I first looked at the breakdown of our selected song for the red carpet stage, I divided the verses and choruses into solos, duets and full group based on what I thought would be the most interesting and what would give the most people a chance to shine. When I brought forth my ideas, Danny and Faith jumped immediately onto the solos and were group voted in after a quick audition for which part they would take on. I remember making eye contact with Melissa at our round table and asking her if she'd be willing to do a duet in the middle of the song. When she didn't perk up right away, I asked, "What about if it was with me?" She looked up and her eyes sparkled. I think in that moment I had found the exact balance of what she was needing to break free of her nerves; someone she trusted to sing with her and to be her safety net for if she felt lost.

After that, it was just practice. We started to sing it just within our group, and then the kids eventually found a few more students and Kim to come for a bigger audience with some external feedback. The tears in Kim's eyes moved the kids, and they were beaming smiles from ear to ear for the rest of the day. The positive reactions that they received from their peers and mentors were what drove them to such a fantastic and moving performance at the red carpet.

In early practices, I often saw Melissa with a furrowed brow, battling with a voice inside her head telling her that her singing was being judged and noticed by others. Over time, I think she discovered that she actually doesn't mind being noticed for who she really is. I think that Melissa gained her courage and
inspiration from the ability to literally use her voice freely and without judgment.

I don't know if it's something that I did, or if it's instead something that she rediscovered within herself during our process of working together (personal communication, January 20, 2016).

Melissa stepped onto the stage barefoot, with classmate Trevor following. Marley, sporting blue sunglasses and a huge smile joined her on guitar. Danny, Jolene, and Faith kneeled in front, and Danica’s friend sat on a cajon drum. My field notes document that my heart leapt as I suddenly realized that Melissa might sing. I shivered with anticipation. Was she really going to sing—again? Melissa elucidates her inner experience - “I was very nervous and excited. I think I got the courage and support from the group that was singing - mostly, though, from Danica. She gave me a pep talk. Once I got on stage my heart was beating so fast. I was excited, but also nervous. I was going to share my talent with people” (personal communication, January 22, 2016). Faith began the song accompanied by percussion and string; Melissa joined voices, pairing with Danica, and then ended the song as the solitary voice. It was sweet, and unexpected—astonishing in fact. The crowd erupted with hoots, hollers, and applause. I instantly shifted my gaze to Ellen who was weeping and laughing in celebration of Melissa’s emergence. The joy in the room was palatable; Danica reflects:

I will never forget standing on stage singing our duet together, with Melissa belting proudly beside me. And I certainly will never forget the pride radiating from Melissa to her grandmother in the audience, eyes wet with joy (personal communication, January 20, 2016).
With the protective seed coat cracked open, trust has taken root with joyful songs emerging. Now, what is to come for Melissa? She responds:

   It was a mellow experience. I was so proud. I have to say it was hard. I had to be accountable. We all had a new beginning–a fresh start. We all broke out of a never-ending prison–to have a second chance to be happy–not to be judged–not anymore–not to be accused or criticized. We are all unique”

(student reflection, June 2015).
Barak’s story

In the midst of the typical debriefing at the end of one of our oft’ atypical days—telling stories, making meaning, inquiring deeper—Murray and I are interrupted by Barak—a freckled faced thirteen year old man with a voice that changed dramatically over the summer. We are caught off guard. It’s dark outside, closing in on the dinner hour. “I brought you tea and oranges. I thought you could use them.” Delighted by the unexpected gift, I welcome Barak and salute his kindness.

“I also wanted to tell you both that I’ve been elected by the governance committee to be the President of the class. Whatever you call it. I’ve thought about it a lot and have decided that I want to do it.”

“Hmmm. What makes you think that the school needs a leader?” I query while nibbling on the fruit. Murray watches quietly. Barak and I have known each other since he was seven and he attended the elementary school where I taught. A child of distinction, he sported suits with softly creased pants and polished loafers in grade two, holding hands with a mother who wore loose skirts, feather earrings and long flowing hair. I was delighted and intrigued when he was placed in my classroom, the Ozone, in grade six, and stayed for grade seven. Was he “the mayor” (as some other teachers called him) after all?

“Well, you tell us to take things up—that you’re not going to be bylaw officers—and it’s pretty obvious that we need some sort of control, and I want to do it.” On the first day of school, Murray and I had explained to the students that we would not be taking on the role of bylaw officers—no matter what—and that we didn’t know what would happen, but were committed to disrupting established patterns of external control and promoting self-governance. This stance emerged from Murray’s study of colonial practices and his belief,
therefore, that there’s no hope for democracy through the practice of external controls. On the other hand, my position grew from a life lived both afraid and addicted to institutional structures of reward and punishment. If there was a trophy to win, I would crave it. If someone in power wanted something from me, I would often comply—if only to receive the resultant prize. This diminished my spirit and ceased my growth. It has required great effort for me to transform this inner condition. My life resultantly has become an exercise in the cultivation of freedom for myself and for my students.

With this in mind, students and teachers of the Community School were responsible for co-creating protocols for approaching and solving problems. Committees had been formed to solve the multiplicity of dilemmas that organically emerged during the first month. An overall governance committee had been established to support the other committees, as well as to assist them in living out their mandates. Barak and eight others had gathered around the question - “How do we make big and little decisions at the Community School?”

Murray and I had introduced this democratic structure as critical tensions arose during circle gatherings, and suggested that anyone interested could join the governance committee.

“Have you noticed how Murray and I try to follow a model of servant leadership? Are you aware of what that means, Barak?”

“Yes. I know that it’s about supporting others—helping things function better—like Martin Luther King and Gandhi.”

“Are you aware that servant leadership is very, very difficult? That it never seems to end well for servant leaders? Think about Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Jesus … it
didn’t end well for them” I suggest with a nervous giggle and a glance at Murray—who nods.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Servant leadership is a dangerous journey. It’s hard work. It’s very tiring.”

“I know. I want to try.”

Our discussion concludes by encouraging Barak to bring up his bold offer with the class—to “take it up” as we have a habit of saying at the Community School. Energized by Barak’s imaginings, of his desire, Murray and I wondered how his peers would respond. I thought back and reread my notes about the first inquiry of the school year focused upon “an Examination of YOU” - provoking students and teachers to explore their gifts, strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and presenting them to the classroom community. Barak had declared himself as someone “without any weaknesses” and was challenged by Thor that perhaps “not knowing your weakness is a weakness”. I also recollected the moment that Barak had strongly reacted publically to the study of residential school trauma for First Nations peoples in Canada by rhetorically asking “Why does this matter to me? It’s not my problem that my ancestors did this. What’s this have to do with me ?” That night I wondered if these public comments would frame Barak’s leadership as dominating or colonial, creating a fearful response in the students. In contrast, Barak had displayed a capacity early in the school year to befriend an assemblage of diverse folks–frequently disagreeing, and then bouncing back to relate once again without blemish, or so it seemed. I pondered whether this exceptionality would appear as a leadership strength to his peers–representative of an inclusive and hospitable spirit able to problem solve and forgive.
The next day, Barak dressed up in a suit and formally shared his vision—volunteering his services to the community in a thoughtfully crafted speech - “Our class is now a rough diamond. Think of me as a polisher.” Being as it was early November, a young lady in the audience quipped that as a politician he should be wearing a poppy. Barak gracefully smiled, opened his binder, pulled out a poppy and pinned it onto his lapel. I was stunned by his authority, confidence, and the legitimacy with which he took this up. After all, he was standing in front of fifty-six peers, most of whom he had only met six weeks before. Barak’s proposal went to a vote and the majority voted in favour. Barak ended his speech by responding with passion to some of the challenges that our new community was facing and how he planned to respond to them as leader:

“A very large number of people [in VCS] is not getting the message that this is not a free ride through high school. I can tell you from personal experience that this is not a free ride. My first year in the Ozone I was very much like these people, but after a few months I became more aware that this was not fun and games. Those people, and you know who you are, please understand AND if you are not willing to stop being silly and not really listening, please go home on that day that you are OR go into the mainstream school. There’s a time and place for these actions and the library or a serious learning environment, it is not. Thank you. Questions, comments, feedback, concerns?”

Students from the Ozone practiced this feedback protocol from the genesis of the Community School without prompting from me. It was exciting as teacher to witness this. It’s not always easy to discern what students do to please in the moment and what they do because it has taken up residence in a deep place within and become a way of living in the world. It made sense to Barak to ask for feedback. The first respondent
was an Ozonian, who provoked a thoughtful voicing of questions, comments and concerns:

“When we started the governance committee [at VCS} we said that the leader of that committee would not be called the class president. So I’m just wondering–why would you call yourself the class president?” queries Sherman in a gentle, joking tone.

“Because I feel that I am more than just the leader of the governance committee. I am more or less the leader of the class, and I feel that president is the right term. Now, I’m not saying president as in–I’m the president, I’m the hotshot of the class. No. I’m saying president as in - I’m like Barack Obama or John F. Kennedy, which means I am not somebody who is going to take the power to my head and become power hungry and ruler of the classroom and make everything right–like if you aren’t listening then you’re going home. If you’d like a different term then you can talk to me about that,” responds Barak with a slight edge.

“Can we just switch it to class prime minister?” asks Sherman with a chorus of “yeah!”


“Okay. One. What exactly does the class president do? I mean class Prime Minister. Two. And wouldn’t the helping people be the care committee?” wonders Dylan.

“Sometimes things might have to be solved in a more serious manner–than something like a gift basket. It might have to be done in a bigger situation. And me being class prime minister it basically entails that I’m like a teacher. I’ve stepped into the role, as Murray said, like Jesus or Gandhi or (laughter) that’s what he said. So that’s basically what class prime minister means. That basically means–gosh that’s hard to explain - I am
a peaceful power figure. I don’t know if that sounds very good or not, but that’s basically what I am.” Barak’s answers unearth considered thought. “I won’t change things with my power and authority. It will have to be decided democratically.”

Skylar, a founding member of the care and concern committee, is agitated, however, by what she perceives as Barak taking over. The VCS community had quite a number of students who had experienced significant trauma in their lives and so were quite easily triggered. Their agitated feelings were expressed every morning during the circle check-in. A group of empathetic students—some of whom had never directly related to others who had experienced these kinds of sufferings - had gathered and formed a committee to respond to pain expressed or intuited with a basket of small gifts. “I feel like when you’re saying if people are sad or lonely they should come to you or Kim or Murray. That’s kind of what we are trying to do in the hospitality and care group. So it feels like you’re kind of like taking our job. Why?”

Barak responds assuredly, “So if you feel like I’m taking your job, then I’m not going to take your job. You guys can deal with that. I felt like while I was writing this—like the gift basket means a lot and I get the gesture - but I think with people feeling sad and lonely, it’s a little bit different than people who are going through hard times.”

Skylar persists, “But there’s other things that we are doing in our group that we haven’t really done yet, but we’re talking about.”

“Then maybe,” pauses Barak, “not to sound harsh—maybe start doing something.” He looks at Skylar. The dialogue is paused as Skylar, a bright and thoughtful young woman processes, Barak’s response. Barak moves his glance to the other hands waiting to speak.
I speak - “So, when you’re saying that you want to take up a role in here kind of like Jesus or Gandhi. I think Murray also said Martin Luther King. So, when you say that you’re taking on a teacher’s role, are you aware that it means that you have to serve others?”

“Yes,” says Barak without hesitation.

I continue, “Listening to your message, I really do hear service in your message, and I’m excited by that because when Murray and I are the teachers, it actually requires that we serve everybody–so like last night I was working until 10:30. Is that what you’re saying that you want to do? To put in your own time, outside of school, to serve the community? That’s a huge commitment–to not work from a control perspective and from a service perspective. And that’s really what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Barak calmly states. I mull and feel the compulsion to punctuate–“Whenever you feel a call of service, it’s sacrifice. You would support others–like today in circle when Mia felt sad, you would come alongside and support her. In another role you would be lecturing to everyone about how it’s awful that no one took up what Mia said. Do you see the difference? Maybe your voice isn’t as strong as my voice–so can I support you in this? An invitation–it’s very invitational to be in that role. So, it’s very important what you’re offering Barak. Sacrifice is messy and painful. I hear Barak taking that up. Thank you.”

Barak chooses Jenny to speak next. Jenny is a parent volunteer in the Community School. She has joined us each day since the school year began photographically documenting our experiences. “I noticed that you have connected with so many different peers and I have appreciated that. I totally affirm your role and I’m excited. I’ve called
you mayor since I first saw you—at that first gathering that we had at Kin Beach last spring—and I didn’t know who you were. Skylar, we’ve said that we need more guys on our care committee. It would be great to have Barak on the committee, instead of being threatened by him. It helps us grow.”

Softened, it seems, by Jenny’s words, Barak turns to Skylar and speaks in a tone significantly more gentle—“I’m sorry if I sounded that I wanted to take control of your group. I don’t live with you so I don’t know what you’re doing outside of school time—that you’re doing lots of work.”

Deeply engaged throughout the entire dialogue, Nik turns to Skylar and voices, “I sort of think the same as Jenny. I don’t think Barak wants to take over your committee. He wants to join it and help. At least from the things he said.”

Barak now chooses Danielle to speak, who thickens the tension, asking a powerful question. “What if you are in the committee and you don’t agree with them Barak. Who will decide what’s more serious?” There is a pause. Barak seems fatigued. There has been a lot of questions from peers coupled with affirmation from adults. He doesn’t seem to be backing down, however, from his original vision of leadership.

Murray asks to speak. Barak nods. “This is more of a wonder than anything else. It’s not a question for you, Barak, really. It’s a wonder for all of us.” Attention shifts. When Murray speaks, people lean in.

“I wonder - how does my role change as you take this up? You see, everyone, what Barak has done—he’s taken something up here. I’m not sure he completely knows what that means at this point. I certainly don’t and none of the rest of us in the room probably have a clear vision of what that is. Are you okay if others of us sort of take
things up too? And then check it out with you? Or, have a general conversation? Because some might be thinking “Well, I would like to take this up—but I guess Barak is in charge now. And so I won’t take it up.” I don’t think that’s the message you are sending—but it’s just a wonder.”

Reflecting upon this moment, and the time to mull afforded me because the dialogue is recorded, I notice how Murray sees the greater good of process within Barak’s actions. He is not afraid of disruption nor does he feel any compulsion, so it seems, to manage the moment—to ensure that Barak isn’t power hungry. If Skylar is unsettled, then she is provoked to learn and grow. If Barak is challenged, then he is provoked to learn and grow. From Murray’s perspective, seeds are full of promise and simply need the right conditions to sprout. Attending to providing powerful provocations, and then ample space to process, make ecology building his pedagogy.

On the other hand, I was focused upon assuring that Barak and the other community members understood the difference between the organic nature of servant leadership and top-down authority rooted in control. Attending to each face, asking what do I know already about him, what will help or hinder her growth - trying to discern what to say next to prune deadwood or stimulate growth. My provocations are more personal, more direct and the space I open up, more rambunctious, more demanding. This is a pattern I have learned to deeply appreciate in the pedagogical relationship Murray and I share. I look for openings, for opportunities. My fast processing brain asks “How do I manage this? What do I do next?” Murray answers with a monk-like detachment - “You can’t. Let it go. Be patient. The answers will emerge.” Living in this tension brings us both to humility—the genesis of new life.
The conversation begins to wane. Discipline muscles have wearied. It’s been almost an hour of sitting, of attending, of listening. Nik concludes, “So what Murray said–Barak is not the only one who makes all the decisions. He’s the leader of the group. If you want to take things up you can join the governance committee.” The community disperses as some take up their committee work that has come under attack, some take a craved body break exploring the wetlands, and others sit a while and reflect on Barak’s speech.

Now, nine months later, how do I make sense of Barak’s speech and the implications found within? The movement of governance at the Community School reflects, it seems, a process of unlearning the presupposition of the dominant discourse that legitimate authority lies with the teacher. This process was and continues to be a movement away from institutional reliance on external control–what Dewey (1938) labels “docility, receptivity and obedience” and “imposition from above and from outside” (p. 18)–imposing adult standards “upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity” (p.19) rendering the child servile and dependent (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 81). Our conception of social justice at VCS expanded and became rooted in the notion voiced by Noddings (2003) that “we have no ethical responsibility to cooperate with law or government when it attempts to involve us in unethical procedures” (p. 55). Instead, a more effective source of authority (Dewey, 1938, p. 21) is what the students had to wrestle with when Murray and I stepped down as “bylaw officers”. We wondered together–how do we create a healthy, democratic ecology where all voices are heard and guidance by adults does not interfere with “the principle of learning through personal
experience” (p. 21)? It was a throbbing tension documented throughout my journals and embedded within student reflections the day after Barak’s November speech.

Barak was stirred to reach out on his own initiative–feeling safe to be vulnerable and risk to “look down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order” (Greene, 1995, p. 5). His courage inspired others to tinker and play with a new kind of student leadership situated in a classroom. All students, whether in support of Barak or opposed, had the opportunity to imagine what kind of governance each really wanted, asking themselves “What nourishes me?” “What helps me to grow?” Greene (1995) theorizes that this process of imagining possibilities diminishes apathy and indifference (p.5). Murray calls it “putting skin in the game”. Most certainly, this provocation both delighted and horrified the students at the Community School. The discipline and effort required to generate and express one’s ideas is more arduous than critiquing what already exists. So rigorous and disruptive was this process that some students and their parents demanded the return of bylaw officers - “The governance problems are getting in the way of my child’s learning” (parent, email). Like Noddings (2003), we were wary of rules and principles insisting instead “upon holding closely to the concrete” (p.55). Even though it would have been tempting at times to abort messy and unsettling processes to avoid the perception of permissiveness and circumvent criticism, we had to be vigilantly mindful of whether our suggestions might operate “…as factors in furthering the child’s growth, or whether they are external, arbitrary impositions interfering with normal growth” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 81). Efficiency and an ethic of principle cannot trump patience and an ethic of caring (Noddings, 2003) if growth is the desired outcome.
At the same time Murray and I tried to understand where each child was in his understanding of governance and authority in order to cultivate vulnerability and trust; stimulating each one’s particular growth. Dewey (2001) concurs - “It is the teacher’s business to know what powers are striving for utterance at a given period in the child’s development, and what sorts of activity will bring these to helpful expression …” (p. 81). Caring is what Noddings (2003) identifies as the process of considering “their natures, ways of life, needs, and desires” (p. 14).

We noticed there was a small group of young women who were willing to sit quietly and be voiceless for most of the day. Murray challenged them to speak their truth. He would specifically call on them during circle conversations—“What do you think, Maggie?” “I know you have an opinion, Olivia.” We challenged their perception that neutrality was an option in this space—“You are either for something or against it—so what’s your decision?” It took a while for them to understand their responsibility to others—that social justice required them to find the courage to speak, to make a personal investment in the community, and that the passive stance of victim never supports growth and development.

We also noticed a small group of young men who had experienced significant trauma in their lives and who became intoxicated with newly found power and control. They would corner individuals and judge them on behaviours that they disagreed with, such as throwing garbage, interrupting conversations, not taking things up or spending class finances inappropriately (in their opinion). Although they saw themselves as classroom judges, they contravened the very things they held up as imperatives never to be violated. On occasion, when this dynamic was brought to my attention, I would first
care for the wounded or angry heart, and then privately address the hypocrisy I too had seen—validating their attempts at student governance and challenging their intentions.

Operating in the shadows, however, the judges were able to target students, who then shut down. These targeted students found themselves deeply embarrassed by the confrontation, which conjured up past memories of the pain of being perceived as a tattle tale with few or no opportunities for reconciliation. They hoped instead that the comments would cease on their own. Bystanders or the voiceless did not want to become targets so they too brushed the incidents aside—internalizing the injustice, but afraid to even begin to voice their agitation.

This went on for a few weeks. Murray and I, aware of the injustice and resultant lack of emotional safety for some, held our power back, no matter how tempting it was at times for me to default to the role of bylaw officer. We perceived this as an opportunity for someone to act and question the injustice that was happening, bringing it into the light, and in doing so, inspirtiting the community to mindfully move closer to socially just practices. Would dwelling in this complicated place provoke someone to “locate the potential and act on it” (Macintyre Latta, 2013, p. 85) as we left room for deliberating on what was happening within and to the fabric of the community? As Macintyre Latta (2013) describes—“The trust placed in process embraces contingencies as expected and as being productive” (p. 84). We held.

And then, one morning, a grandmother interrupted the morning circle and expressed her anger and outrage at the way her granddaughter was being treated, referencing the conduct of a group of young men. She demanded to know who was doing this and spent time talking to the student governance committee about how issues like this
are handled outside of school. This unexpected provocation was transformative as students were shocked and stirred to make meaning of what was being interrogated. Some began to publically share their stories of unjust treatment by members of the student government; “judges” were challenged to practice what they preached. As teachers our stance of patience was reinforced. As a community, we grew through experimenting with another model of authority that we didn’t want to foster anymore, awakening us to the fact that “there are indeed alternatives, other ways of orienting human beings in social … space” (Davis, 2009, p. 217). We discovered that we could try them on for size and see if they suited us, or not. There were some voices, particularly parental ones, to the contrary who would have preferred a quick and punitive reaction by Murray and I; holding fast to the traditional conception of one person (the teacher) dominating another (the student); the model most adults have been conditioned to follow. Judging a traumatized judge, however, just doesn’t sit well within a stance of social justice; it’s only through care and compassion that people are willing to be vulnerable to grow and change (Kessler, 2000). Rescuing a victim and not offering alternative means to develop his or her voice is a simple, short-term solution lacking mindfulness. Dewey (1938) would argue this dynamic is miseducative as nothing is learned for future situations when oppression is experienced. Resultantly, the Community School will continue to investigate authority “with an eye to its enactment as a relation” (Bingham, 2010, p.25). The students will have a key role in tinkering with models of authority as VCS moves into the future.

Much has transpired since the day the ground was tilled and ideas of governance planted. Barak was invited to shadow the B.C. Minister of Education during the early summer, and has recently invited students from the community to join an under 18
political party parallel to the upcoming federal election. On the other hand, Barak ended his year at VCS without a formal leadership role. In fact, to this day, governance remains a complicated conversation at the Community School. Barak did, however, produce a year end “Red Carpet Gala” complete with a red carpet, paparazzi, medals presented with speeches honouring each student as well as the community mentors, and finally a catered dinner and dance. Did he understand that he had moved from a position of leadership to the embodying of leader? Barak summarized his year of lived experience this way:

I have been through some ups and downs, happy and sad times, but I still love this school. I used to be the class Prime Minister and that is when I learned the most. When I had to persuade people and to be at the top–learn to be a little bit human. I still love this class for how most are kind. Even though I made a lot of people mad, I can still talk to them like friends. It doesn’t matter how hard things get, we all persevere (student reflection, June 2015).
Gage’s story:

This image jumps out from the hundreds I am sifting through—he stands at the white board, teaching us, in boots, gumboots, really big gumboots, size thirteen. Fifty-six students submit to his authority and over one hundred eyes follow his every move. “You really should listen to me closely,” Gage speaks through my journal. “Wikipedia is definitely not your friend. I mean, if I have trouble understanding it, imagine your difficulty.” A sea of heads nod in response as they envision this deep truth. If Gage says so, it must be so; Gage doesn’t lie. “I’m giving you some detail, but not too much—that’s what you need to do for your inquiry. Oh, and I can’t answer all your questions, that will give you too much information. I’m just trying to give you a sense of these big ideas of science.” He begins to talk and graphically represent content from the B.C. science curriculum. This continues for over an hour.

Gage took up this challenge enthusiastically and studied over forty big science concepts the previous weekend. His deep passion for science and resultant understandings has far surpassed my own. He had already taken the reins of an inquiry science group I had initiated, while other students interested in ecology explored the local wetlands, and a third group of future medical professionals worked with a Doctor mentor. Independently, Gage created a structure whereby one student would come up with a burning question related to science and each student would then form a hypothesis—“Does everyone know what a hypothesis is? It’s very important in science. There’s a difference between a theory which is more developed than a hypothesis, and a hypothesis, which is an educated guess,” explained Gage. “I call it a theory though because not everything in science can be proven.” Then, each would conduct research and re-gather a
week later to discuss their findings. Gage encouraged each student to facilitate the
discussion of their burning question. He shared the leadership, as I had shared it with him,
and the students learned. Following the lead of VCS protocols already established, Gage
structured an environment where students had the freedom to respond in a variety of
unexpected ways to scientific queries. He passed no judgment and encouraged
experimentation of all kinds, transforming the subject of science into joyful science
exploration and experimentation. Dewey (2005) offers an explanation to this observed
dynamic:

   In the normal process of becoming acquainted with subject matter already known
to others, even young pupils react in unexpected ways. There is something fresh,
something not capable of being fully anticipated by even the most experienced
teacher, in the ways they go at the topic, and in the particular ways in which things
strike them. Too often all this is brushed aside as irrelevant; pupils are
deliberately held to rehearsing material in the exact form in which the older person
conceives it (p. 177).

As a peer, was Gage more able than I as teacher to intuit where student understanding was
and how to deepen their understanding of scientific processes and content? This brings to
mind Vygotsky’s (1978) conception of proximal development, as well as the reality that
Gage has a capacity to imagine and re-imagine abstract scientific concepts that I can only
memorize and recite. In these ways and in this context, he is the best choice for teacher.

Gage was positioned as scientist-in-residence at the Community School in a
variety of ways. My notes remind me that in the fall he had explained the effects of sugar
on the liver - “a spawning of chemical reactions.” In the winter, he presented passionately
about the Hydron Collider and how scientists are using it to prove theories. “People say

about the Hydron Collider and how scientists are using it to prove theories. “People say
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Is it okay if I say a couple of things? Not only are we in charge of our own
earning, we are in charge of how we want to spend some of our time. On top of

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(personal communication, May 22, 2014).
Gage’s thoughtful comments scattered throughout my journals, fieldnotes, and his oral and written reflections consistently reveal a deeply rooted understanding of the processes and purposes of the Community School. They lead me to wonder about his contributions to the makings of VCS. There are many; no one has pushed my limits of teacher quite like Gage Carruthers has.

When I first met Gage, as his grade six teacher, he was defensive and disengaged—“essentially illiterate” his mom asserts; labeled by his pediatrician as Oppositionally Defiant. He had filled his boots with endless strategies to cope with the humiliation of school, and had held tightly to his maternal attachment, unwilling to trust or develop relationships with anyone else (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). So institutionally challenging was Gage’s insolence—repeated offences no matter the consequences - that the principal would graciously offer to drive him home whenever he misbehaved - framed not as suspension, but rather as a kindness. From my reading of his school file, Gage and his mom were given the message that he did not belong, was not worth understanding, and couldn’t learn because he couldn’t be controlled.

Gage, as learner, embodies Dewey’s (1938) notion - “The need that the more ordinary, direct, and personal experience of the child shall furnish problems, motives, and interests that necessitate recourse to books for their solutions, satisfaction, and pursuit. Otherwise, the child approaches the book without intellectual hunger, without alertness, without a questioning attitude” (p. 69). My relationship with Gage has taught me that a willingness to live as teacher in the tension of unknowing, without jumping to assumptions or becoming anxious, has the potential to yield a kind of fruit that can never be manufactured, socially engineered (Dewey, 1938; Pinar, 2004) or in some cases even
imagined - “Reverence arises from a profound comprehension of human limitation, fraility, and finitude, prompting awe and wonder at the incomprehensible” (Rud & Garrison, 2010, p. 2778). Whenever my mind scrambles to make sense of chaos or disregularity, I am aware now of my heart whispering “let the child lead you”. Like Chuang Tzu’s mindful butcher, I attempt to discern the true nature of the other before acting - slowing down, watching carefully, holding back, barely moving (Palmer, 1990, p. 73). I have Gage to thank for this disciplined stance.

When I think back to our introduction three years ago, I remember intu ting that if Gage was going to grow and learn, I would need to gain his trust. Without a doubt, in my experience, there is no education without relationship; so, it was rocky from the beginning. The slightest experience of discomfort would send Gage reeling. He would leave the classroom, hide or argue relentlessly. Attempting every attunement strategy I could remember in those moments, I would talk gently to Gage, focusing upon regulating my emotions - ever mindful that his peers had already made a myriad of judgments about him, and it was my deepest desire to empower him, honour him, love him (hooks, 2000). In the evenings, I would pour over attachment literature. I was hungry for answers, wanting desperately to find a window into the inner world of Gage, and in so doing, nurture his soul (Kessler, 2000) and shine a light on the institutional injustice done to Gage and his family.

To disrupt Gage’s cycle of avoidance, in consultation with his mother, I asked our principal to please stop driving Gage home. I hoped this would allow me the space to better understand the root causes of his inner turbulence. The next time Gage had a break down, I explained that school was for learning and growing and if he didn’t want to learn
and grow he could go home. “I don’t know where I live. I can’t,” he spewed. I shrugged my shoulders and asked him what he would do now. He was furious. He left the school anyways. Thankfully, the teaching assistant assigned to my class, Laurie, was willing to follow Gage and provide support in finding his way home if he asked. They accompanied one another for over two hours as Gage problem solved and eventually found the familiar. The second time this happened, Gage and Laurie walked for fifteen minutes when he changed his mind and came back to class. It didn’t happen again. I wondered why: Was this a seed of trust slowly rooting in his stuckness? Did relationship slowly start to trump discomfort? Or was Gage simply too frustrated to go to all that effort to walk home? Was this a wall of futility that Neufeld & Mate (2004) describe that provoked Gage to change? Three years later, while pouring over my data, these are familiar questions that often emerge when I think about Gage.

Now over the hurdle of remaining at school for the day, I changed my focus to engagement. This immediately went badly. Gage seemed to interpret any invitations as impositions, my enthusiasm as a barrier. Was he embarrassed by attention? Was he defended against vulnerability, and unwilling to open up to considerations originating outside himself? Did he feel like he was being controlled or pressured to do someone else’s bidding (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). He would shut down—both physically and emotionally—head dropping, shoulders sagging, no affect. Photographs from that time show Gage making ‘funny faces’ or looking away from the camera, and my journal mentions Gage shutting down and getting annoyed rather than expressing himself when tensions arose in the classroom. I comment that he didn’t seem to be able to tolerate tension or struggles of any kind, and yet I could sense that he wanted to self-regulate, but
couldn’t.

Stuck myself, I decided to back off completely, letting Gage respond how and when he wanted to. I didn’t ignore him; instead, I followed his leads, reverentially modeling restraint and respect, looking for opening and opportunities–windows into Gage’s inner world. In my field notes, I scribbled imaginings of a movement away from defensiveness that could free up energy for growth; from a stance of reacting towards initiation (Mate, 2000, p. 160). This took courage and tenacity on my part as it was sometimes commented by colleagues that I was letting Gage “run the show.” Ironic, to be sure, as it could be argued that controlling or irreverent relationships (Rud & Garrison, 2010) with teachers provoked Gage to take this stance already.

And then, one day, out of the blue, Gage told me that his mom had lost her job. It was a passing comment that signified vulnerability and trust; my heart skipped a beat. Seizing the opportunity to show Gage my care for him–to disrupt his conception of school as judgmental - I took some groceries to his home after school. I vividly remember the image of walking up to the gate and meeting the family’s large German Shepherd, who barked and then danced around me as I climbed the steps to the entrance. Tommy, Gage’s mom, opened the door. Her eyes teared up when I handed her the bags. “Gage told me that you lost your job so I thought you might appreciate some things.” I remember Gage peeking around the corner. I acknowledged him by smiling. I remember working hard to hold back–trying to appear nonchalant–so as not to threaten Gage, and lose this precious opportunity. Tommy was very grateful. I knew I had made a good decision, and wondered what kind of impact my action would have on our future relationship.
After that offering, Gage began to open up to me. Could it be that caring for his mother cracked him open? Knowing Gage as I do now, four years later, I can confidently say “yes.” Tommy is Gage’s north star. His respect for his mother is deep and wide—what she says goes—a product of strong attachment rather than power and control. And so, caring (Noddings, 2003) for her translates into caring for him. The fact that she received my caring whole-heartedly cemented that transaction.

I have always been intuitively, and more recently, in graduate school, cognitively aware of the strong link between children’s growth, and healthy, vibrant relationships with adults (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Neufeld & Mate, 2004; Walker, 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Upon reflection, I notice that it has always made sense to me that children are not broken or in need of a cure—even if they have an identified disability, or like Gage, a thick file full of reports documenting a resistance to being defined or filled by others. Curating the report cards I wrote for Gage in the Ozone from 2011 - 2013, I notice that the information moves beyond grades and attempts to capture the whole child—heart, mind and spirit (Aoki, 2004) through a strength-based lens. They become celebration letters which inspire (Aoki, 2004), a complicated conversation (Pinar, 2004) of who the child is and who I imagine him to be—with nurturing, with support, but mainly through building his confidence, his belief in the intrinsic value and capacity—the promise - that lies within (Dewey, 2001/1902).

As I reread my notes, I am prompted to remember that Gage’s opening was very, very gradual, and required a more formal meeting at his family’s kitchen table. Tommy told Gage that she trusted me now and said it was safe for him to put confidence in me as well. She called me Gage’s “mom-at-school”; I sensed a seismic relational shift as Gage
surrendered to my love and care (Kessler, 2000, p.5). My journal reminds me that Gage was thoughtful and attentive throughout the meeting. We agreed that Gage could text or call home whenever he needed support with problem solving or the clarification of expectations. Tommy told Gage it was time to stay at school all day, and to learn how to be more positive. Gage agreed to begin moving away from defensiveness manifested in negative self-talk and judgment to more honest and accurate expressions of difficulty, challenge or feelings of vulnerability. Seeds of change were planted in this ecology of relational trust.

Now I can see that as I relaxed my need to control him and was more accepting of Gage, he expressed a need. As I responded to his words, Tommy began to trust me, and Gage noticed. In creating alternative perspectives for Gage to consider and raising her expectations, Tommy invited me to relax even more, and Gage noticed. Leach (1994) conceptualizes this movement as a slow-growing plant:

that roots in children’s identification with parents or parent substitutes.

Learning how to behave—and to be more comfortable behaving that way—depends on parental influence rather than power, on the warmth of the relationship adults offer rather than the clarity of the orders they impose (p.117).

This understanding of social justice and reverence for children deeply inscribed itself upon my heart through my lived experiences with Gage and Tommy, and is my north star when I start to feel overwhelmed by the complexities of classroom life.

So, attended to and left alone, Gage’s growth began quiet and hidden, and was made evident slowly through the sharing of his thoughtful connections and a growing willingness to participate in physical activities with the class. His confidence grew, ever
so steadily leading to evidence of some flexibility and toleration of himself, others, the community, and less counterwill (Neufeld & Mate, 2004). He still really struggled to find words when he felt vulnerable; he continued to withdraw and look for things to complain about. I practiced the discipline of reverence as I spoke gently to him—reminding him of his gifts, talents, strengths, and growing capacities. When I did it well and spoke deeply into his spirit, his head would drop and awkwardly rotating back and forth with arms flailing beside his body, he would smile. As an unintended outcome of my kindness and patience, the other students became more actively supportive of Gage. He remained unwilling to take up any of the project-based learning opportunities offered in the Ozone, possibly because of his constraints with text or possibly because of the intensity of a growing awareness of self. Again, I remind myself of Leach’s (1994) wisdom boldly marked in my journal—“Learning acceptable behaviour is more difficult and takes longer than learning any specific skill because what has to be learned is complex, involves control of powerful impulses, and often demands that children act against what they see as their own best interests” (p.119). Gage needed time.

After nine months of these kinds of efforts, Gage decided that he wanted to learn more about Montsanto, so he began to read—just like that. A great fan of YouTube as teacher, Gage had also become aware that Internet searches were impeded by his limited spelling skills—another natural provocation. Printing pages from Wikipedia, I watched Gage pick up a ruler and, applying sound/symbol understandings, struggle to comprehend the complexities of genetic engineering independently. I theorize that after years of documented formal reading interventions and resultant oppositional behaviour, Gage decided literacy skills were necessary to more fully answer his cravings, his needs, his
demands (Dewey, 2001/1902). Until literacy moved from an external abstraction to a personal reality, it held no significance for Gage and operated, instead, as an assault on his spirit that he defended himself against time and time again.

More growth was made evident when, during the same season, Gage was inspired by an aboriginal guest teacher to take up the challenge of writing a coyote story; it was the first story that Gage had ever written. Was this an outcome of him understanding deeply and independently that being literate was powerful? Was this an outcome of his desire to become more engaged by participating in a community project? Whatever the reason, Gage was finally able to express the astonishing depth of his thinking and knowledge of narrative structure. Although his very first piece of polished writing, it was not immature and undeveloped; it was the complex telling of the same story from four different perspectives. His pride and confidence was demonstrated as he took feedback to polish his piece, and then practiced reading it. My field notes describe how he persevered and took risks, trusting rather than getting anxious and agitated. His pride and confidence was enacted as he told his story at a public gathering in front of over fifty people. Tommy could barely watch as she wept with joy as he finally shared the capacities she was deeply acquainted with, and no one else had yet experienced. I was gob smacked by his growth, and still wonder, four years later, what would been lost if I had not cultivated my patience, my regulation, my willingness to appear permissive to others so Gage could be free to grow? Vanier (1979) concurs - “Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community takes time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community we have to be friends of time” (p. 90).
Gage continued to open up as he rejoined the Ozone for grade seven. Now, more rooted and therefore confident, his preference was full participation in all learning opportunities. When worries added up, particularly about his Mom, Gage would need a few days to regroup. Now, however, he was more able to find words to describe the source of the anxious feelings. Gage joined the Community School after being unschooled for a year through a distributed learning program for eighth grade. Together, Tommy and I decided that placing Gage in a traditional high school program would serve to prune tender growth, applying expectations that he could not meet—which may potentially send him back into dormancy. The proposal to initiate The Community School was in the making with the school district; Tommy wrote letters advocating for this kind of learning community for her son, and then waited.

Gage’s passion for the Community School is found in its unique ecology, and how it nurtures his growth and development through its co-created structures - “translated into a potent instrumentality for dealing effectively with the future” (Dewey, 1938, p.23). Gage expresses how he can primarily focus upon science here, how he is bonded with his teachers, and that he is not being forced to learn. My notes document in substantive detail the development of Gage’s agency–becoming more true to himself and consequently more flexible - a movement away from a static position of defense towards growth. A story from Gage’s mathematics mentor further illustrates this journey:

When Gage finally did start coming more regularly to our math sessions, wearing his standard Santa hat and gumboots, he rarely brought a pencil or seemed to be paying attention. He claimed that he had lost his notebook and the loose-leaf paper I would supply him, would get left behind with little to no notes taken. For
these first few weeks, I was not sure what to make of Gage as a student. He was quirky and social. He had a group of boys around him to whom he would speak about high level ideas in science or politics. I learned quickly that he worked better on his own, but even then he was much less engaged with the material than other students.

My expectations for Gage were no different than my expectations of his peers - to try, to grow, and to make connections between the different pieces of mathematics and real life. And yet, even with these standards I soon realized that Gage, in his own unique style, was brilliant.

One day, when we had been working on the Pythagorean Theorem for a week or so, I sat with him. He had nothing written down, but I asked him how to attack the problem. When he looked at me and told me that he wasn't good at this kind of stuff, I prompted him to try to explain it to me. I started by drawing him a right triangle with two known sides. I handed him the pencil. He smiled at me, and started talking through his thoughts. While the thoughts were sometimes hard to follow, I could pick out clear logic. When it came to solving for the final answer, the only piece that he stumbled over was using a square root rather than dividing in half. This student with his backwards 5's and 2's, who rarely wrote anything down, understood the process of the problem more than most of the other kids in the class. He just didn't find any reason to apply himself.

Over time, I started to give him more and more reason to try by building a relationship with him. I found that once he trusted that I was there to support, and not to criticize or drag him down, he was more likely to grow. In my daily rounds
around the classroom, I made a point of sitting with him as much as possible to assure him that I was interested in his progress and hearing that he understood what to do.

He started to make connections on his own. When we were working on volume and surface area of cylinders, he asked me to double-check his work. I realized quickly that he wasn't working on a problem from class -- he had created his own example about the chemistry that he does at home because it was more relevant to his interests. He was becoming invested, engaged, and more alive with every class. He raised his hand, participated in class discussions, and he asked questions.

One of my favourite moments with Gage was an interview that we had together regarding his progress and his missing unit project near the end of my practicum. I asked him what his reason was for not handing in the project. I didn't let him get away with saying that it was 'just because he didn't', I pushed for why he didn't hand it in. It turns out that the idea of using our geometry knowledge to build a community garden was of no interest to him, because he didn't feel it was something that he would ever use in real life. What he was really passionate about was rockets. When I said that at any point he could have told me that he would have rather written up plans for a rocket using all of the same criteria and I would have been happy to allow it, his face lit up with excitement and confusion. He told me that he had never been in a position before where a teacher let him follow his interests like that. Usually, Gage said, he had to fit into
the rules for the other kids so he just chose not to try (personal communication, July 2014).

His voice expressed, Gage received feedback by teachers, by peers, and by visitors that he had thoughts of great value that needed to be shared with the world. I notice that I made particular note of his comments. When the Minister of Education visited this spring, Gage astonished the room with a significant response to the Minister’s question of what makes this particular school special:

Whether kids see it or not, VCS is very much helping them learn proper social interactions and teaching them how to handle themselves in social settings. We have all these committees, and governance, which doesn’t control but influences the other groups. They make sure that committees take care of things. And on top of this, because we have our own free speak, there have been other people who have said ‘you’re not governance, so we can be governance’ - which creates a whole different social dynamic that teaches people how governance functions (personal communication, May 21, 2015).

As the school year was ending, Gage actively participated in a one-hour examination of his learning with a small group of his peers facilitated by Murray and myself. As his thoughts were being revealed that morning, I observed the burgeoning of new life - comments reflecting a willingness to look critically at himself and a desire to grow beyond his passion for science - “In reflective thinking, I see my problem: I refuse to adapt to new learning. I find self-analysis very beneficial in my head. I feel as though I need to heavily work on self-analysis and perseverance. I need to believe in myself more” (June 2015). To paraphrase Dewey (1938), Gage approaches learning now, as a
result of his efforts, his desires, his energies, with intellectual hunger, with alertness, with a questioning attitude (p.69). And I am acutely more aware that my essential role as teacher is to create, co-create and continue to re-create, a rich, complex ecology or “whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities” (Dewey, 1938, p. 44) to provide experiences that lead to growth in each child–true to their fibre, their potentials, their passions. This involves, as Dewey (1938) asserts, the rigorous challenge of attending to “what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning” (p. 39) while simultaneously judging what attitudes in students “are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental” (p. 39), and constantly taking into account “how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (p. 40).

Would I have this same depth of understanding without having known Gage? Would I be the same teacher? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Others would have challenged me. Others have, and continue to. None, however, have provoked me to grow and develop as teacher like Gage–his frustrated brilliance, his unwillingness to accommodate any box, with a mother as passionate and steadfast as Tommy who never lost faith in her son despite substantial social pressure and judgment by the dominant discourse of education that questioned Gage’s capacities over and over again. The wisdom forged through our relationship is etched upon my heart, strengthening my resolve to inspire social justice in education, striving “towards some coherent notion of what is human and decent and just” (Greene, 1995, p. 1) for all children and their families in schools.
Dylan’s story

The Community School paused for summer break on June 25 in keeping with the district calendar. On July 5th, upon checking my email, while analyzing data for this paper, I noticed a message from Dylan. This was surprising; he rarely initiated conversation with me all year. I also know that Dylan greatly values his time away from school–filled to overflowing with his succulent imagination and vibrant family. “Hey. It’s Dylan. I want to talk about a play I am writing. So, can we meet up at Triumph on Wednesday at 12:00? Or really anytime works for me. Email me back” (personal communication, July 5, 2015).

After some scheduling challenges, Dylan and I meet for breakfast. I pay for my latte and sourdough toast, and he has a second breakfast ‘without mom around’–root beer with cookies. The attentive gaze of this young man astounds me–particularly because he spent much of the past year at the Community School withdrawn and quiet in the large group generally and in my presence alone. I didn’t realize that we had connected in any significant way. He begins and I am immediately stunned - “I really wanted to meet with you and talk with you. I watched you all year taking risks and doing things that horrified me. I would never have had the courage to do. I think we are quite a bit alike and I realized that you were okay even though you were taking big risks. I learned a lot from that.” Mystery and wonder surround me as I sipped my latte and listened to Dylan’s two ideas for scripts. In those moments I become more rooted in the concrete, lived awareness that knowledge really is provisional, textual, multiple and never finished or complete (Ellsworth, 1997); I naturally prefer the unpredictable.
On the quest for openings and possibilities (Greene, 1995), I had awkwardly tried to relate to Dylan all year. Dylan’s father had produced his first play this past spring based upon an award winning script he had penned, *Judith Ruins Everything*. I had used this familiar opening many times to awkwardly provoke connection and relationship with Dylan in my comedic manner - “How’s it going in your group today? Is Dylan ruining everything?” “How was your trip to the daycare today Dylan? Did you ruin everything?” Dylan would smile and jab back with a slight edge - “Good one Kim. How long are you going to use that one?!” or “Nothing original today Kim?!” It didn’t go anywhere. The rapport I was hoping for or am familiar with when relating to students didn’t seem to be developing–and so the summer breakfast invitation was remarkable.

What is there to learn from a student who hadn’t provided me with much feedback or perhaps I had interpreted as dismissive or disinterested in what I had to offer as teacher? And yet, from his perspective, he had been attending to me all along–responding to the ecology. Why this disconnect? What can I learn from those who don’t seem to be giving me anything? Do I really believe that roots must be penetrating the hidden long before fruit is visible? I had after all told parents to trust the mystery of this process many times in the past. I now find myself compelled to live it more fully; to practice what I preach. I re-searched my data–trying to understand what had been significant for Dylan - “the fervent and secret work that goes on beneath the surface” (Bahnson, 2013, prologue). I wonder - will the tall, well-rooted and mature tree - the symbol of the Community School–help me make sense of Dylan’s journey?

In the natural world, growth happens when a seed finds itself in warm, damp darkness. Without these conditions, the kernel will remain dormant - full of life, but not
yet open to growth. With these conditions, curious roots emerge from their place of
comfort. They push deeply into the earth, tasked with the absorption of mineral elements
for the embryo plant still waiting within its protective dwelling place. Then, the
vulnerable young shoot can’t help but emerge from its place of comfort - stimulated to
fully become all it can become. “Roots flourish in deep tilth, creating a vast subterranean
network that feeds aboveground life” (Bahnson, 2013, prologue). This process happens
with stunning regularity if the conditions are right. This has been our image of the
Community School from the beginning—the place where Dylan found himself planted.

Curating photographs, I see that Murray and I spent much of our time during the
fall participating and engaging in the iterative process of preparing, working, observing,
and thinking about the soil of the Community School. Ecologists remind us that “...if we
practice feeding the soil, the soil will feed the plants, and plants will feed the people”
(Bahnson, 2013, prologue), and I have always been aware of the connection of classroom
culture to overall student growth and development. Until VCS, however, I was not fully
awake to how much students crave this deep, rich, shared culture that is critical for growth.
My notes remind me that during the fall, we observed students sitting tightly together on
couches, benches, chairs—like sardines—at times even criss-crossing limbs. Dylan was
often found at the bottom of a pile on a couch—his red hair spilling out. At first, I wrote,
we were concerned about the potential sexual undertones. I documented the day it
dawned on me that these young people were like dry sponges needing to be filled up—
saturating themselves with human connection. Upon reflection, Dylan definitely fit this
conception—a capable boy from a supportive family—with little motivation towards action.
By Christmas, as community had rooted, I can see in the images that the ‘extreme close
sitting’ had diminished significantly. Dylan, however, still needed that kind of physical connection throughout the year.

So, if culture really is, as Wade Davis states “a blanket of comfort that gives meaning to lives” (2009, p. 198), was Dylan needing this reassurance? Had he lost his sense of meaning at school? I wrote that he seemed to embody so much more than he was willing to express. I am surprised by the patience I reference throughout my journaling that is required to feed the ecology of the classroom–this living organism - “Soil both craves life and wants to produce more life, even a hundredfold” (Bahnson, 2013, prologue). Just when I believed that the students were ready for more stimulus, more challenge, they reminded me that we are still in the process of nurturing the soil - “the conditions for rebirth are being created” (Palmer, 2000). Stymied, I questioned whether this was permissive; whether I needed to push harder, heighten my expectations. At times, I would ask Dylan to show me the writing he was busily focused on most days, and he would passively refuse–looking at me blankly. Sometimes I would push a bit more and his gaze would not change. I observe in my notes that when my guard was down–through exhaustion or confusion - the dominant discourse seeps in and I lose faith and trust in the ecological mysteries inherent in the rhetorical question, “Does Dylan need more time to trust me in order to share his deeply personal thoughts and ideas?” A colonial vantage point (hooks, 1994; Sirolli, 1999; Y. Zhao, personal communication, January 30, 2015) unsettles me as it takes up temporary residence in my heart and mind. In these moments, Dylan’s passivity frustrates me. Retrospectively, however, I can see that these experiences serve an iterative purpose–to remind me that I am not as comfortable with mess and muck as I once believed. I am not as complete as I once imagined (Greene,
1995—a recurring lived experience of the very vulnerability I seek to cultivate in the
students, in Dylan (Vanier, 1979). My journal speaks of many such new beginnings.

A quiet, nonchalant guy, Dylan is visually distinctive with shoulder length red hair,
piercing eyes and freckles. He usually arrives late to morning circle—living quite a
distance from school with two strong-willed younger siblings who drag their feet each
morning. He thus began the year on the periphery of the community—attentive without
much ‘skin in the game’. Photos point out the artistic clothing he dons—particularly his
fall choice of the slightly oversized vintage sweater with leather buttons or his winter
choice of the more oversized long black leather coat. He announces himself as quirky,
artistic, and ‘his own man’. I like this in a person. Substantiated by a journal entry, I
remember these qualities from our introductory interview eight months ago, along with
his brilliant vocabulary and passion for acting. He had missed our get acquainted
gathering in the spring as he was in a community production at the same time.

A few weeks into the school year, after casually stating that I was finding it
challenging to get to know Dylan, his mom, Lisa, suggested that we have coffee one-day
afterschool. “It’s always been like this with teachers. Dylan doesn’t show who he really
is at school. It’s so frustrating!!!” Lisa has an astonishing way of expressing herself that
is at the same time passionate, spirited, and gently disarming. She is attentive and down
to earth, with a great love and acceptance of her children. I like this in a person too. I
write that I looked forward to a more thorough introduction to the mysterious Mr.
Anderson.

Murray and I meet Dylan and Lisa afterschool one day in early November at a
funky local coffee shop, all four of us squished in a booth. Thankfully, and somewhat
randomly, I audio recorded that meeting. Having a very strong auditory memory, I was under the impression that I could remember conversations with a scribble or photograph as a prompt. For example, Dylan spoke quite a bit, and I enjoyed listening to his voice. Lisa was very quiet and then passionate about the journey her son had been on at school. And then Lisa reminded me that the recording speaker was at the bottom of my iphone and not the top. More fully awake now, I understand that I would have been recalling the gist of our conversation—the themes, the dynamics, the impressions that I was listening for—but not the spirit and multiple meanings that are embodied in a voice, in a conversation, in the spoken word. To make sense of experience by listening and listening again, I am able to “take up multiple aspects of a contingent (not a self-existent) world” (Greene, 1995, p. 19). For example, Dylan was able to clearly articulate his experiences with teachers, and how school is focused upon grades and not learning. Lisa explained some of the complexities of their family and Dylan’s place there; as well as expressing her irritation with Dylan’s essence being ignored by teachers. The recorded conversation gives a fuller and more complete perspective.

On the audio recording, Dylan immediately comes alive, and it becomes evident why Dylan holds his cards close to his chest—“What really set me off—in grade 6 I had a great teacher—just sometimes we didn’t agree on things—at this point (in my schooling) I knew that teachers weren’t always right—I’ve got this now—I have a handle on this fact. And so it was kind of wiggly—I don’t know how to describe it - okay I agree with you on that, but … not this. But then of course, he’s the teacher so it doesn’t matter if I don’t agree with him,” Dylan asserts with a confidence I had not yet seen in the classroom. Now, when I look back, I am impressed by the depth of his social awareness, his social
intelligence, and curious about this entrenched sense of teacher authoritarianism at twelve years old.

Murray digs a bit. “So what was it like to live in the tension of this - I know this now that teachers aren’t always right, but I’m being asked to pretend that they are at school. What was that like?”

Dylan responds with ease. “It was very annoying - really, really frustrating. It was kind of like - whenever I would point out that he was not right, it was like–shut up. No. Just shut up. And so it was really frustrating.”

Murray continues, “Did you check in with your parents and ask for some help with this? To help you talk it over with the teacher?” I remember listening intently, watching for any cues in Lisa that may have contradicted his strong opinion.

“No, ‘cuz in my idea, if my parents told the teacher this and that - it’s kinda like me telling him this and that. He is so set in his one way because teachers are always right. It doesn’t matter what we are telling them too much. They are always right. They are set in their ways. So, one of the reasons I joined the Community School - because it was so much what I was looking for–doing my own thing, actually, finally. And the teachers would actually listen to me when they were wrong. It just sounded so much better than if they were wrong they would tell me to shut up.”

My entry into education and rooting in social justice has grown out of my observations that classrooms are usually not hospitable places–neither for the perceived winners or losers. My lived experience was that school was a place of tension: always doing what others want and winning. I was already conditioned to please adults at home, so I was a very successful student. I complied to the rules, diligently completed every
assignment, and looked for ways to get more stars on the spelling chart than anyone else. I won the Citizen of the Year in Grade One. What I remember more, however, are indelible moments inscribed upon my heart—relived as I meditate upon Dylan’s words: Collette being relentlessly teased for her white hair in the presence of our teacher; Gerry being mocked and humiliated at the front of the class by our teacher for being disrespectful; Casha’s desk being dumped by our teacher because he was loud and wouldn’t conform; and Kenny being mocked over and over until he ran away crying with a teacher passively observing. I felt sick and knew deeply that doing nothing was wrong - “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so” (Freire, 1993, p. 66). The habit of accommodating adults because of the power they wielded, as well as not knowing how to express negative emotions, meant I could not stand up to those horrifying dynamics. The angst resonated deeply - “Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (Freire, 1985, p.121). I fought for teacher approval, exceptional grades, access to gifted programming, starring roles in dramatic presentations, status on the student council and other leadership committees, as well as opportunities to show case my athletic abilities. Nothing satisfied. These achievements could not silence the inner sense of oppression (Miller, 1997) which was the genesis of my identity as teacher.

On the other hand, as a non-conformist, Dylan was describing the oppressive circumstances he found himself in—as a child who wasn’t willing to play the school game. I return to the conversation; Lisa finally speaks. I lean into the voice—still curious about her point of view even after many listenings. Dylan was extraordinarily opinionated—at
times making me pay attention to the volume of our conversation in such a public place. Most parents, in my experience, would have tempered his voice.

“I knew that it was happening, but it was hard because he (Dylan) wouldn’t acknowledge that it was happening. And so, because he wasn’t acknowledging it, it was hard to have a dialogue with the teacher about it. I hate to compare kids, but his brother and sister are much louder. If things are not suiting them, they will loudly complain, but he is much quieter. So I knew that something was happening, but again it was hard to have a dialogue with his teachers, they would say everything is fine. So it was hard to change and advocate when there’s no acknowledgement. With Dylan’s personality, he’s a very relaxed and very go with the flow kind of guy, so I think a lot of teachers just saw that he was doing just fine. He was bringing in A’s and B’s in the class—so why are you complaining? Yeah. There’s these other elements that are not being addressed though. Yes, but he’s getting A’s and B’s—everything’s fine. So, it’s hard to affect change when your kid is getting decent grades, but they are not growing.”

Dylan punctuated this moment—remembering a project that he deeply engaged in and learned a lot through, but which didn’t fit the teacher’s conceptions, so he was given a C-. “I learned via the school system that growth doesn’t matter. Doing what the teacher says matters. I found that really weird,” Dylan explained.

The fog slowly lifted and it became clearer why Dylan initially established his place of comfort as an outsider at the Community School. He had a very strong sense that school was unjust. In fact, he expected it to be inhospitable for his thoughtful, reflective, home-supported self. Teachers, in particular, were not to be trusted, and I was a teacher. After teaching for some time, I was not at all surprised by Dylan’s calculations. In many
ways, I shared them—living as teacher in unconventional ways was disruptive with my colleagues. With students, however, it could be said that this is my biggest strength. I would often say to edgy and defiant students who were pushing every button of mine and everyone else’s in the classroom, “Okay, here’s what I’m thinking—I could take you to the principal or out for lunch at Tim Hortons. Hmm, I’d rather go to Timmy’s. Want to join me?” The student would always be caught off guard and dumbfounded at my generosity. I would invite them to order whatever they wanted from the drive through menu. It was so upside-down—so unexpected—that the seed of trust was planted in very resistant and wounded hearts. Now I wonder, although not defiant himself, did Dylan vicariously experience this part of me as an observer? Is that where trust took root?

In addition, Dylan had become very aware of the dichotomy between letter grades and growth. Although I had always hoped that letter grades would not be the measurement tool of learning and development at the Community School, we could not speak with assurance about alternate mechanisms; our leadership was not yet open to co-creating another way through Ministry exemption processes. At the Community School we focused upon formative assessment such as descriptive, non-judgmental feedback, and did not provide numbers or letters to parents or students throughout the year. Only one parent out of fifty-six was frustrated by this absence.

Later in the coffee shop conversation, I learn that Dylan hated conflict and found sticking his neck out very difficult. Did he enter school with this belief, a result of being the eldest child relied upon as peacemaker with two “rabble rousers” as siblings (as Lisa describes them)? Was it further developed as he experienced schooling? Murray put words to this retrospective wondering—“I see you as a very passionate person who
doesn’t express this passion much at all. That’s what I’m curious about. I know that you’re not always comfortable with what’s going on in the Community School, but you don’t say anything."

At this point, Lisa became Dylan’s advocate - “He has it in him to be a shit disturber. He has that in him. He feels it. He doesn’t know how to access it yet. That’s what I was hoping that he would find in this environment [the Community School]. That he will find what makes him tick and not just let things guide him.”

I add my observation - “When the class is stressed or stressful, what I notice you do is to go inside and start talking to Faith. I interpret that as it bugs you, but you don’t do anything about it.”

Dylan quickly responds, once again revealing his deep self-awareness - “It’s my natural defense thing. When I see something that I don’t really like - maybe it’s boring or I don’t think it’s necessary or it’s a waste of time–I won’t say anything. I tell myself - I don’t have to be involved in this. I’ll let them do it. But I do want to be able to say that I can handle this.” Finally, a place to start–some common ground–he wants to learn how to take things up.

Returning to our summer breakfast encounter, I now have more insight with which to answer my original query - What can I learn from those who don’t seem to be giving me anything? The serendipitous audio recording of our coffee shop dialogue pinches me to alertness - to the fact that much, so very much, is going on beneath the surface of anyone’s life that a mindful stance should probably begin with this assumption. I am challenged by the notion that before this study I have always understood in the abstract, and am awakening to in the concrete–when another is responding to life in ways
unfamiliar from my lived experiences, assume that their life reflects a complex reality that is just as powerfully rooted in them as mine is in me. Davis (2009) says it this way - “the myriad of cultures of the world are not failed attempts at modernity, let alone failed attempts to be us. They are unique expressions of the human imagination and heart, unique answers to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive?” (p. 19).

I return to the conception of mindfulness (Rud, 1995; Nouwen, 1975) introduced at the beginning of this paper. Dylan embodies the stranger—the unfamiliar voice—with the mysterious and, I now see, sacred purpose of stretching my sense of the possible. The experience of a twelve year old boy provokes an opening to new visions of maturity for myself. From that moment on, I started to look at my work as teacher in a different light. I became conscious of the fact that I was not as reverential as I thought I was. Like Sirolli (1999) I can now see that “consciousness is an extraordinary thing” (p. 9), removing blinders as it deepened my perceptions and enlarged my capacities to see.
6. **Discussion: What is the lived curriculum we have co-created at The Community School?**

The portraits of Melissa, Barak, Gage and Dylan echo and amplify larger themes permeating VCS as a whole. Within these narratives of experience, I also find reflections of myself—confronting, challenging, and strengthening my identity as teacher. How do these thick descriptions illuminate the makings of VCS and the lived curriculum we have co-created there? Through substantive sense making—looking for patterns in these narratives—I take the stance once again of the host welcoming a stranger (Nouwen, 1975; Rud, 1995), the gardener attending to biological particulars (Vanier, 1979), the mermaid exploring the depths (Nim, 1950), and like Chuang Tzu’s butcher (Palmer, 1990), attempting to discern the nature of my research findings. I slow down, looking carefully, holding back from reductionism or assumption making, barely moving. As I study these portraits, Rud encourages me to pay attention to my reactions of what may be new, different, confusing. Nouwen suggests that the strange may be a seed of great potential—if I lean in and endure tension. Nim calls me beyond the obvious—to the unknown, the hidden, the mysterious—asking me “What else could there be?” “What are you missing?”

Time and time again, during the year of curricular enactment at VCS, students have taught me that attention to diversity requires the preeminence of relational attunement—“Curricular enactment conceived as such is inventive and responsive” (Macintyre Latta, 2013, p. 86). Complexity like this cannot be solved by following rules or applying algorithms because, as Eisner (2005) asserts, “They almost always have more than one solution, and they typically require judgment and trade-off” (p. 109). And, so I ask—Melissa, Barak, Gage and Dylan—who is each one? What are their personalities, gifts,
limits, fears, insecurities, experience, passions and what does each embody? Greene (1995) elaborates on and extends this powerful and challenging vision:

To find one’s right action may be to discover the self as someone with a sense of agency, the author of a life lived among others and not merely a passive observer or an accidental tourist or a member of a crowd (p. 177).

And so, I move with care.

My research documents that it was and continues to be tremendously effortful to cultivate a culture that encourages this kind of inclusive and respectful thinking, as well as a mindfulness, moment by moment, of the temptation to mandate or manipulate (Noddings, 2003, p. 60) - as Melissa begins to sing her fragile, authentic self back into the world; as Barak lives the entanglements of democracy; as Gage adapts and reconstructs himself; and Dylan becomes rooted in trust once again. My research also makes evident that children like Melissa or Gage who have experienced trauma—both known and more often hidden—live in our classroom communities. They need specific sensitive and intentional interactions in order to develop, whether we are mindful of this truth or not. Dewey (2001) admonishes - “To possess all the world of knowledge and lose one’s own self is as awful a fate in education as in religion” (p. 107). I needed to acknowledge Melissa’s story and to seek to understand what she had gained or lost in the process, without making assumptions to simplify complexity. It’s critical to remember in the cacophony of the dominant discourse that students must first be rooted in an ecology of significant emotional safety in order to grow (Vanier, 1979). Perry, et al (1995) have thickened Vanier’s resonating conception by documenting “the role of early experience in determining the functional capacity of the mature adult—and therefore our society” (p.
This most certainly inspires me towards greater social justice in the places I live alongside young people.

Melissa’s portrait points to the capacity of storytelling to invite vulnerability into the classroom ecology - “To name something is to bring it out of chaos, out of confusion, and to render it understandable” (Vanier, 1998, p. 25). Honest, authentic, vulnerable stories of pain and struggle called forth a spirit of emotional safety and non-judgmentalism in our space–an invitation to awaken feelings, heal hearts, and reveal true selves. Richard Wagamese (2008) wholeheartedly agrees - “Stories are meant for healing” (p.4). This resonates within my research.

Barak’s portrait speaks of the criticality of moving from the monological to the dialogical in classroom ecologies. His narrative reminds me of the inherent complexity within dialogue; it’s not simply about voicing your ideas, your opinion, your feelings. Through the experience of establishing student led governance, Barak provoked dialogue that didn’t always fit well with his conceptions; disappointed and at times humiliated, he experienced the personal cost of leadership. Cultivating conversations is about relationship and interaction; to enter into dialogue one must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love. Each must question what he/she knows and realize through dialogue that existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created. It’s not for the faint of heart, however; it’s disruptive and rife with challenge. Dewey (1915) agrees and extends this idea when he says - “the child puts himself at the standpoint of the problems that have to be met and rediscovers, so far as may be, ways of meeting them” (p. 67). My research documents the resultant growth.

Gage’s portrait illuminates the damaging effects of social engineering (Eisner,
2005; Pinar, 2004) and curricular fabrication (Arendt, 1958) on a child and parent, and the organic reality of being human—the tension created, the reverence, care, love required if children are to grow into fullness as thinkers, as beings, as agents, as collaborators, as communicators.

Finally, Dylan’s portrait of temporary withdrawal and detachment echoes the “…fervent and secret work that goes on beneath the surface” (Bahnson, 2013)—the patience, time, trust that human development actually requires. It reminds me of seed germination, birthing, butterflies—emergence in its time, in its way, when ready, viable, strong. This speaks to real growth, lasting growth that Dewey (1902) substantiates—“We do not know the meaning either of his tendencies or of his performances excepting as we take them as germinating seed, or opening bud, of some fruit to be borne” (p. 112). It prompts me of the hunger I feel as teacher to create patterns of classroom life in which everyone can flourish; to come to full aliveness.

Honest, vulnerable storytelling; wholehearted and whole-minded dialogic encounters; the damage done to living things by underlying mechanistic metaphors; and the unpredictable complexity of authentic growth are significances harvested from the portraits. What, then, does the data suggest has been the course run or the seeds sown and cultivated? This study suggests the lived curriculum of VCS is emergent, responsive, and co-created. In the following sections, I examine the relations at play, foregrounding each in turn and their interplay as the strength cohering the ecological working of VCS

**Emergent Curriculum**

My research, and the portraits that ensued, reveal that the lived curriculum at the Community School is emergent - Melissa and Marley playfully gathering in the silent
classroom each morning with a relationship slowly growing; Barak hearing a call of leadership and choosing to take it up; Gage responding to the fact that his teacher doesn’t understand the big ideas of science and choosing to spend a weekend preparing to teach his peers; Dylan watching and studying without any apparent action, and then deciding to act. What does emergent refer to? In complexity science this is “a term used to describe things that are unpredictable, which seem to result from the interactions between elements, and are outside any one agent’s control” (Wesley, et al, 2006, p. 128). Emergent curriculum is described by Stacey (2009) as “organic, constantly growing and evolving. Sometimes it is even circular, as we observe, discuss, and examine documentation, raise questions, and observe again” (p. 13).

I could not teach Melissa to sing again; I could, however, cultivate an ecology that was awake to the presence of and open to the sharing of vulnerabilities leading to the emergence of what was already there, but hidden. I could not teach Barak to take the kinds of risks that would be required of him as leader; I could, however, cultivate an ecology that made a practice of offering feedback, and facilitated the solving of problems so a more developed, thicker understanding of governance would emerge for Barak and for the entire VCS community. Without intrinsic interest, Gage would not have spent an entire weekend preparing for his mini lessons, and Dylan would not have exposed his thoughts (even with my many attempts at nudging) until he was ready. My experiences support Dewey’s (1902) assertion that “learnings and achievements are fluid and moving. They change from day to day and from hour to hour” (Dewey, 2001/1902, p. 112) as students exercise “ingenuity, patience, persistence, alertness” (Dewey, 2001/1915, p. 26). This dynamic is nested in relationship at VCS - “a relational approach to education insists
that [teachers] must focus on the process of learning and consider very deeply how we can help students, as social beings in relations with others, become knowers” (Thayer-Bacon, 1995, p. 168); becoming is what emergence refers to.

How do these narratives of emergence inspire social justice and school transformation? My research (in addition to my quarter century of teaching practice) has revealed and re-revealed that the experience of being human is richly diverse with a multiplicity of variables and their interplay - genetic, neurological, experiential, personal, familial, ancestral, societal, cultural, historical to name a few. In the four portraits alone, for example, there are a variety of responses that emerge in moments of stress: Melissa’s trauma in early childhood primed her to comply and shut-down; Barak’s gritty love of politics made for provocative discourse when he was frustrated or challenged; Gage responded with a resounding “NO” towards anything originating outside of himself; and Dylan retreated into reflective solitude until new trust rooted. In addition, four unique responses emerged after a reading of their portraits: tears; “Thank you for not including many other stories you could have included”; “You hit the nail on the head”; and a warm, happy smile. Like Greene (1993), it doesn’t make sense to me that singular visions of what it means to be human are cast. My research documents that this can significantly interfere with each person’s unique emerging - “there cannot be a single standard of humanness or attainment or propriety” (p. 212). These reflect colonial norms: paternalistic and patriarchal - “I know what’s best for you” (Sirolli, 1999). I want to remember that there are many voices in our world always in the process of emergence (Bahktin, 1981). Melissa, Barak, Gage, and Dylan represent only a few of the fifty eight (including Murray and I) at the Community School, and the telling of their stories alone
awakened me even further to the significances and differences indwelling one classroom space.

Accordingly, I agree with Evans’ description of ecological variegation - “The Earth has spawned such a diversity of remarkable creatures that I sometimes wonder why we do not all live in a state of perpetual awe and astonishment” (1966). Yes, every brain is minutely differentiated in the same ways, and yet emergent expressions are as variable and distinctive as fingerprints. I notice that attending to individual portraits provided an opportunity to linger in the particular, the unique, away from generalizations and remote language that reduce the lushly layered and complex to simple, clear, and banal. Melissa’s story extends far beyond being different and not fitting in; Barak lived and continues to live the complexities and uncertainties of democracy; Oppositionally-Defiant does not even come close to describing Gage; and Dylan is so much more than the quiet, nice kid who doesn’t bother anyone. At the Community School students are offered experiences, and through them their identities begin to wiggle into emergence. This is a process that cannot be controlled, manufactured or forced; it’s often unexpected, and as the portraits illuminate, stimulated in the midst of teachable moments. The dried seed will remain dormant until the outside conditions are right for germinating emergence; my attention to organic particulars is critical.

This emergence dynamic is a challenge to be sure, and my research documents the messy, chaotic and exhausting reality of VCS–this attending to the ever-in-the-making, ever-in-the-emerging; this processing and decoding of human texts emerging in never ending genres. Still, this is the social justice Murray and I longed for when we first
imagined the Community School; it is also what coheres us in our most difficult, tense and complex moments as we wonder - “What is right?” and not, “What is simpler?”

**Responsive Curriculum**

My research reveals that the lived curriculum at the Community School is *responsive*—providing opportunities for Melissa to sing if she so chooses; leaving space for governance to problem solve without ‘bylaw’ interference; respecting Gage enough to not react even when judged as permissive by colleagues; and asking Dylan’s mom for help when he seemed so unresponsive. Dewey (2001) braids *responsiveness* to *emergence* - “it is the teacher’s business to know what powers are striving for utterance at a given period in the child’s development, and what sorts of activity will bring these to helpful expression, in order then to supply the requisite stimuli and needed materials” (p. 81). Melissa required the cultivation of emotional safety over time; Barak needed space and opportunity to take chances, make mistakes and get messy; Gage needed a removal of external expectations—both critical and affirming—so energy taken up with a defensive posture could be used for growth; and Dylan required adults to demonstrate humility so he could once again relate to teachers in healthy ways. Within these examples, interactions unfold and students follow as well as lead. Pedagogic leading, Aoki (1993) contends, is “not so much as asking the followers to follow because the leader always knows the way. Rather… it is a responsible responding to students” (p. 266). This kind of *responsiveness* enables individuals “to behave intelligently through the exercise of judgment in situations that demand reflection, appraisal, and choice among alternative courses of action” (Eisner, 2005, p. 29). The teacher is present, alert, and disciplined - exercising great self-control.
Like Eisner (2005), my journals record my constant inquiring—trying to make sense, of this “inordinately complicated affair filled with contingencies that are extremely difficult to predict, let alone control” (p. 48). I notice that most of my wonderings have to do with relational complexities (Thayer-Bacon, 1996) in the classroom: What do I sense in this moment? What is *this* person feeling? Experiencing? What does *this* person need right *now*? From me? From another? Is this a knee-jerk response or rooted in thicker understanding? As I act, what is being revealed? Have I waited long enough? What happens if I act too quickly? Van Manen (1991) identifies this *responsiveness* as pedagogical tact - “the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desire” (p. 125) and “a fine sense of standards, limits, and balance that makes it possible to know almost automatically how far to enter into a situation and what distance to keep in individual circumstances” (p. 126). When I lived in these ways, my journals reveal unexpected and sacred moments of insight, wisdom, and resultant growth as teacher.

An illustration: One day, close to Valentine’s Day, Drew asks me to step outside during a break. Drew is a young man with a life full of more challenges than I will probably ever know: intellectual limitations as a result of fetal trauma, familial neglect, and subsequent foster care; and violent outbursts that have permanently damaged relationships, and eroded trust. I follow him down the hall and we open the door to the parking lot. He quickly turns to face me - “Colton and I are very worried about Sam. Things are not going well at his house. Can you help us?” Colton, too, has lived his twelve years in potentially crippling and unfair circumstances.

“Of course. Yes. Thank you for asking. What do you need?”
“Well” says Drew with confidence, “we need you and Murray to just be there. We’ve already talked to Murray. Colton and I will do the talking. Please don’t tell Sam though. We don’t want him to run away.”

A time and private meeting area are found a few days later. Murray and I gather with the young men, taking seats at the table; Sam is at one end with Drew and Colton on either side. The tone is serious. Colton starts, “We know what’s going on at home Sam. We have been through what you’re going through.” Sam awkwardly smiles. Drew nods in agreement, attentively gazing at Sam’s face, looking for clues of where to go next.

“Yeah. It’s pretty awful. My mom was doing the same kinda stuff. The police were involved. That’s why I went into foster care.”

I watched in awe as young men spoke with such powerful vulnerability about their experiences, their moms (whom they love deeply and did not want to betray), and their brutally hard decisions that led to greater safety, stability, and self-care. A privileged childhood did little to prepare me for this moment; my uncertainty, however, kept lips sealed and ears wide open. My presence, as well as Murray’s, seemed to provide the young men with the courage they needed to go down this dark painful path of memories and consequences. We were aware of few of the facts presented that day.

Sam responded numbly. Again, with a smile - “It’s okay. I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. It’s not true. I’m fine.”

Triggered by the familiar lie, Colton reacted, lifting the table almost to his shoulders, and setting it down again. Tears welled up in his eyes - “I know. I used to say the same thing. But what you’re saying is NOT true. She’s using Sam. I know she is.”

Drew then began to tell his story, which I had heard from social workers–one that
they told me he would never tell, ever. Drew finished his harsh tale with an exhausted calm. “I know what it’s like Sam. I really do.”

Undeterred, Sam shrugged his shoulders. Colton seethed with frustration and Drew looked confused. Responding to Sam’s intransigence and perhaps sensing that Sam may need privacy from the presence of adult professionals to speak freely, Colton asked Murray and I to leave. We agreed, intuitively sensing the rightness of the request.

As we walked out of this sacred space that we had been invited into, Murray turned to me with wet eyes, saying “I believe in God again.” I nodded in reverence and disbelief of the deep trust Drew and Colton had in me, their compassionate love for Sam, and their responsiveness to circumstances they deemed wrong regardless of the personal cost or astonishing risk-taking required. Greene (1988) calls these actions empowering as they “create spaces of dialogue … spaces where they can take initiatives and uncover humanizing possibilities” (p, 13). I feel more fully human even as I re-member this experience.

Murray and I still talk about the gathering that day and wonder if anyone who knows those young men would believe us. The experience was so mysterious, evocative, and full of a power no one could orchestrate. Is this what Baptist (2002) refers to when she envisions curriculum as “a “happening”, a “realm of possibility” which occurs when making meaning comes together with intent and with enactment; where learner, teacher, and milieu collide. Through this collision, new visions for learning are collectively formed” (p. 29). As teacher, this experience and the iterative reflection that followed has enabled me to develop patience and faith. Drew and Colton showed me that much is going on beneath the surface–deep root growth–that I am not aware of. In my journaling,
I asked myself: Can I trust in this mystery? Can I believe it’s happening even though evidence of its presence emerges only from time to time? Why do I so quickly forget the beauty and wonder of moments such as these? Through the formulation of these questions, I practice a more reverential responsiveness.

A second and different revelation of responsiveness is taken up by Lewin-Benham’s (2008) suggesting that it is “an exchange of ideas, debate, and negotiation among children and teachers that leads to initiative of a project and determines how a project will continue or branch” (p. 196). My research illuminates how curricular enactment at VCS is inspirted through student questions and discoveries, interests and passions, interactions and observations, idiosyncratic and diverse experiences, conflicts and celebrations. These dynamics are woven throughout the portraits, and project examples fill my journals. An illustration: At the beginning of the year, the very new and unfamiliar VCS community wondered, “Who is each one?” From listening to what the students wanted to know about each other, a self-study was proposed, voted on, and taken up. Each, including the adults, was asked to examine themselves, and was provoked with questions that would hopefully amplify each one’s strengths, gifts, talents, limitations, vulnerabilities, wounds, and the conditions in which each grows best.

The students’ self-study presentations were a three-week adventure. Each day found four unique personalities introduced to the community. Some students had prepared slideshows, and in the moment responded by improvising. Some brought props. Others performed - jumping on the tables and shocking the audience. Some cried. Others laughed. Listening deepened as the days progressed. The offerings were quite formal at the beginning. As the days progressed, a spirit of safety slowly emerged in the space
itself, and within the spaces between each student (that deepened the vulnerability, 
deepened the understanding, deepened the compassion, deepened the connection.) The 
emergence of new understandings stimulated a variety of responses - assumptions were 
faced, at times interrogated, and sometimes shattered.

I notice now that the students were responding to a call to know themselves and be known by others (Palmer, 1993). Callum desired to not be afraid anymore to speak his mind. Skylar shared that competition with her older brother shuts her down. Adam revealed that he used to stutter. Soren talked about his dad leaving for four years. Ashley said that she offers her creativity and patience to the world. Walt voiced, “I like to be as laid back as I can. I don’t like to get angry. It’s embarrassing the next day!” Finally, Carlton expressed, “I always want to know what others are thinking, which is obviously impossible. So, it’s a weakness.”

Murray and I noticed that relationships widened and deepened as the provocation was taken up, responded to, and a multitude of varying narratives emerged. As we leaned into others’ experiences, we became aware of assumptions being revealed, challenged, and responded to with growing humility. Greene (1995) points out significances to this responsive rhythm I have experienced, and continue to experience at VCS:

Only when the given or taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is - contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense. Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices (p. 23).
I noticed that couches became inhabited by different groupings each morning. The circle check-in became more meaningful as hearts leaned responsively. A nurture & care committee was initiated. A blanket of comfort (Davis, 2009) was being stitched as healing stories were told (Wagamese, 2008). A culture unique to the Community School was responsively emerging as assumptions about teaching and learning broke apart; a rich humus medium was being established, serving to stimulate future emergence.

What makes these conceptions of responsiveness critical for the social justice and school transformation I seek to inspire through my work at VCS? Through relational responsiveness, attention is paid not to judgment of but to thinking about the “cared-for” (Noddings, 2003) because “the student is infinitely more important than the subject matter” (p. 176). This engrossment with the iterative and reciprocal play of back and forth, action and contemplation, expression and feedback, is the rhythm of responsiveness—the cadence of VCS. Dewey (2001) is of the same mind—“let the child first express his impulse, and then through criticism, question, and suggestion bring him to consciousness of what he has done, and what he needs to do, and the result is quite different” (p. 28). The portraits often describe my holding back, my practice of patience as I sought to cultivate an ecology of growth for Melissa, Barak, Gage, Dylan, and others. In agreement, with Noddings (2003), that “in the long run, [they] will learn what {they} please” (p. 176), I endeavoured to root my efforts in Greene’s (1988) belief that “far more is possible for individuals than is ordinarily recognized” (p. 4).

I spent my research year studying student responses to my prompts or nudges, and adjusted my efforts accordingly. I was willing to tailor my ways, my thoughts, question my assumptions so each could grow; sometimes this was in activity and sometimes this
was in a “willingness to let experiences accumulate and sink in and ripen” (Dewey, 2005, p. 105). I have come to conceptualize this attitude as pedagogical love; a love that Noddings (2003) calls “warm acceptance and trust” (p. 65). Hooks (2000) enlarges the notion - “To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (pg. 5) and, I would add, responsiveness. Van Manen (1991) goes even further when he challenges - “Is it possible to act as a real teacher if one is not oriented to children with loving care, trustful hope, and responsibility?” (p. 65).

Counter to the dominant discourse of transmission - “fitting into existing social and economic structures, to what is given, to what is inescapably there” (Greene, 1988, p. 12), or the approaching of life “… mechanically, as if all living persons were things” (Freire, 1993, p. 58), pedagogical love stimulates people to reach beyond themselves in their own time (Dewey, 2005, p. 105). Freire (1993) affirms “men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (p. 65) and Greene (1995) concurs - “Apathy and indifference are likely to give way as images of what might arise” (p. 5). Responsive curriculum at VCS inspires students to become different, to grow beyond where they once were (Greene, 1995, p. 13), as teachers break down the barriers of tradition and uniformity that dry out human inspiredness (Aoki, 2004, p. 369).

My research contains many stories of student responsiveness to the reverential approach taken up at the Community School. What follows are several examples of unexpected, student-initiated, “fluent, embryonic, vital” (Dewey, 2001/1902, p. 109) responses to lived challenges in the classroom:

After a serious fist-fight, the agitated community gathers for a circle of
understanding and hopefully, reconciliation. As I find the talking stick and am about to begin a mediating process, Joseph, a sturdy and opinionated young man, with a tendency towards judgment, leans in and whispers “Let me do this Kim. I got it.” I hesitate, smile, step back and honour his desire to take it up–and he does a magnificent job. He is thoughtful and elegant in his questions, seeking deeper understanding by inviting all voices in the circle to be expressed, while allowing the two young men involved to save face, and at the same time, begin a process of forgiveness.

While waiting for a group to present their burning question inquiry, an unusual sound distracts me. I seek the source and notice Walt raising his arms and yawning loudly; a strange gesture from a very respectful young man. Just as I am about to give him feedback on the curiousness of his rudeness, I watch as his head falls and his body keels over; there is an obvious sound as his head hits the floor. He begins to shake. I leap to Walt’s side, speaking gently to him, as my mind reels with questions. Murray quickly gathers the rest of the students, and escorts them out of the classroom. I can hear students in the hallway ask if they can do anything. In my hyper-focused state, I only see Walt; I can, however, hear sniffling. I glance up, and see three young men seated on a couch intently staring at their friend with wet eyes. I smile gently - awed by their compassionate presence. As the paramedics arrive and Walt’s care is relinquished to experts, Murray and I gather the community in a large circle on the floor of the empty gymnasium. Depending upon their past experiences, students appear numb, sad, or scared. Heads are resting on knees. Some are lying down. I notice one of
Walt’s friends who had been present in the classroom while I cared for Walt; he sat beside me cross-legged - this rugged and usually cocky young man. Then, he dropped his head into his hands and cried out - “I could do nothing to help him. Me, who has had many years of first-aid training. I just froze up. I was useless. I can’t believe it.” I encircled his shoulders and whispered affirmations of his care, his support, his concern–what a great friend he was. He could not make sense of the moment. The talking stick moved around the circle and each voice was raised–in concern, in confusion, in care. I was moved by their compassion for a peer who was quite introverted, detached, and not known by many.

I would not have expected these young men to respond in the ways described above. I don’t believe I would have even imagined them capable of this kind of attentiveness, or willingness to be so actively engaged in the community. Neither Murray nor I had implemented curriculum on how to solve problems or care for others. Instead, we lived the rhythms of each day modeling participation and care whenever called for. Dewey (2005) emphasizes the importance of this pattern - “The very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experiences, it stimulates and enriches imagination” (p. 7). These two stories, and the four portraits, are representative of the kind of responsive curriculum embodied at the Community School: a ‘leading out’ whereby “children who have been provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own questions are the ones most likely to learn to learn” (Greene, 1988, p. 14).

Through pedagogical responsiveness, roominess is attended to, providing space for a multiplicity of growth - the anticipated and the unexpected, the quick and the
tentative - “there is always more in experience than we can predict” (Warnock, 1978, p. 202). The diversity within any community of human beings calls for an offering of different ways to learn, different ways to demonstrate learning, as well as different tools, techniques, and lenses that facilitate the learning process—provoking learners “to pose their own questions, to teach themselves, to go at their own pace, to name their worlds. Young learners have to be noticed, it is now being realized; they have to be consulted; they have to question why” (Greene, 1995, p. 11). Each day at VCS we had and continue to have experiences - both collectively and individually— that emerge and are responded to - “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes” (Dewey, 1938, pg. 38). In addition, “Put another way, I came to believe that humans do not simply have experiences; they have a hand in its creation, and the quality of their creation depends upon the ways they employ their minds” (Eisner, 2005, pg. 151). Each provocation throughout the year, and the multiplicity of responses to those experiences, caused Murray and I to reflect upon the question - “Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” (Dewey, 1938, p. 36). This was a challenging task. At times in VCS, a lived experience caused negative feelings to emerge, and despite deep learning, the student responded with anger and resistance. At other times, a lived experience was pleasant and unthreatening, ephemeral in nature without response; the absence of tension may have been enjoyable, but could not be called educational as nothing seemed to emerge.

The first self study of the year provided a “sympathetic understanding of
individuals as individuals which gives [the teacher] an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning” (Dewey, 1938, p. 39). This knowledge is tentative and fragile, however, and must be continually attended to, as human development is fluid, ever-in-the-making. Murray’s voice reminds me to quiet the inner voice that wants to manage or control the messiness and uncertainty - “You can’t. Let it go. Be patient. The answers will emerge.” And they do, as we respond mindfully: Melissa moving from withdrawn, detached child to confident young woman sharing her passion in front of a room of over one-hundred; Barak moving from confident, self-assured “president” to humbled, reflective young man; Gage moving from stubborn, recalcitrant boy to science genius, and the wordsmith of the Community School; and Dylan moving from anxious, silent kid to deep and creative playwright.

**Co-Created Curriculum**

Finally, my research documents how the lived curriculum at the Community School is *co-created*: conceptualized, initiated, developed, organized, supported, critiqued, presented, documented, and assessed by students, teachers, mentors, and parents. The relationships among the numerous aspects of curricular enactment, the various people involved, and the internal and external processes within each actor create circular and branching pathways of cause and effect, similar to an ecosystem - “Each factor and organism has influence on the others, and many complex interrelationships among them are required to sustain the system” (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 155). This complexity reflects the non-linearity and sensitive interconnectedness of the emergent, responsive and *co-created* curriculum at the Community School; building relationships among self,
students, subject matter, and contexts (Macintyre Latta, 2013, pg. 85) so that “students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (Palmer, 1998, p. 11).

In a North American riparian ecosystem (like the one on the land behind VCS), relationships exist among coyotes, deer, beaver, plants, mice, birds, insects, microbial life forms, and human beings. Relationships also exist among these plants and these animals and their environment - the air, water, soil, sunshine, temperatures, wind, and rain, and the combination of chemicals in them all (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 155). In the same way, within the ecosystem of VCS, relationships exist amongst Anastasia, Kim, Melissa, Ellen, Danica, Barak, Murray, Gage, Tommy, Lisa, Dylan, Skylar, Colton, Drew, Sam, and many others not mentioned in this paper. Psychological interplay exists within each person, and among individuals and/or groups of individuals and their environment: the placement of furniture and collection of materials, the pedagogical tones and rhythms, the provocations and presentations, reflections and assessments, conflicts and reconciliations, as well as their moment by moment interplays, exchanges, outbursts, and co-created processes.

Among many anecdotes from my journal, I will make concrete these abstract notions using Melissa’s portrait as an embodiment of co-creation: Melissa found support and expectations through collaboration with her grandmother, with Murray and I, with Marley, with Danica. She was given experiences of building community through circle protocols, listening to stories of vulnerability, participating in problem solving, responding tentatively with peers through inquiries, and more thoroughly with mentors in small groups as she took risks and tried new things. Her identity emerged through presenting, dancing, writing, and singing, and she demonstrated awareness and personal
growth through her written expressions at the end of the year. Melissa’s emergent presence, actions, and communications impacted Ellen, Murray, Marley, Danica, myself, and many others at VCS. She was present and attuned in the circle, and responded vulnerably through her self-study. She listened intently and with great seriousness to others; her introversion challenged her peers although she came out of her shell responding to adult mentorship. Her learnings were confidently presented, her dancing was unexpected, and her singing was astonishing bringing tears to the eyes of many. Melissa’s writing illuminated a thoughtful, reflective, and gritty young woman and the difficult educational journey she had been on, as well as the wisdom she was becoming rooted in. These expressions, in particular, provoked me to include her as a portrait in this paper.

Can you see the multiple perspectives and relational complexities that operate simultaneously through this lens of co-creation? Melissa acted and was acted upon; the rippling is multitudinous, and can only partially be captured with words alone. Van Manen (1994) elaborates - “Children do not grow in isolation or simply from within, such as seeds or acorns. It is only in certain relational contexts that the thinking life, the developing identity, the moral personality, the emotional spirit, the educational learning, and sociopsychological maturing of the young person occurs” (p. 139). Within this conception, curriculum is most assuredly a co-created process; it’s simply too complex to be controlled, implemented, or discerned by one alone - “Judgments are made throughout process, derived from a rightness deemed fitting” (Macintyre Latta, 2013, p. 86). Who makes this determination? All who are involved in curricular play. At the Community School this means students, teachers, mentors, and parents - “sensitive to the ongoing life
and experiences” (Aoki, 2004, p. 370)—through emergent and responsive curricular enactment.

**Self-Learning: the inner tension inherent in living curriculum**

This study documents my *inner tension* as we live the curriculum at the Community School. Cultivating an ecology that embodies what I now recognize as emergent, responsive, and co-created curriculum, I experience tension - as feelings, and then as thoughts, in my head, my heart, my spirit. At times, it wakes me up and inspires me, provoking roots to push deeper towards fuller understanding and action. At other times, I seize up, feeling lost and parched; discouraged, I dry up. These are fallow seasons. In many ways, VCS was a dream enacted—a place where I could practice in freedom - so, why the entanglements? What is the tension rooted in?

As we gathered together, on September 22, 2014, we entered into mystery. Murray and I envisioned the Community School as a place of mindful teaching and learning rooted in social justice. Germinating, rooting and growing these ideas would require co-creators. Who is each one? How is it that we shall be together? What is the ecology that these unique personalities will require in order to best grow and learn? To thrive? These questions became a daily practice for Murray and I as we reflected upon our work - full of joy and frustration, understanding and confusion, answers and questions –always in the making and re-making, always open to change, and yet, discovering that changing habits of mind is tremendously difficult. We had agreed that we would begin the year without lesson plans or agendas. Looking, instead, for “openings, about possibilities, about moving in quest and in pursuit” (Greene, 1995, p. 15) with students who had the right to be themselves (Vanier, 1979), and an assumption like Dewey’s that
among all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (1938, p. 25). This was in contrast to the dominant ethos of the traditional system we exist within “that uncannily turns everything virtually into “how to do’s”, into techniques and skills” (Aoki, 2004, p. 369).

I began to plant myself in this curricular landscape—the expected and the unexpected, constructing and re-constructing. The inner effort was rigorous and unfamiliar from teaching-as-planned in isolation. Surprisingly, I had often been given feedback by colleagues, parents and students that I was ‘outside the box,’ ‘totally different’, ‘a gypsy artist,’ ‘an outsider,’ ‘on the fringe’—depending upon their stance. I was astonished, therefore, by the inner tension I was experiencing as Murray and I co-planned our days with students and mentors. What was so different about this new context? Was collaborating more challenging than I had imagined? Did I need control? Did I lack the capacities to manage a classroom like this? Searching for the right questions, as well as possible answers, I discovered Wendell Berry’s (1991) imaginings; they help me to unpack some deeper reasons for my tension:

What you are doing is exploring. You are undertaking the first experience, not of the place, but of yourself in that place. It is an experience of essential loneliness, for nobody can discover the world for anyone else. It is only after we have discovered it for ourselves that it becomes a common ground and a common bond, and we cease to be alone (pg. 42).

In a complex system such as embodied at VCS, there is need for the rigorous work of reflection as “no pattern stays in place for long and no intervention has a predictable
result. The world is not acted upon, but rather interacts with us in often surprising ways” (Wesley, et al, 2007, p. 61). Through this disciplined reflection, I have become conscious of the fact that I was not as reverential as I once thought I was. I notice that I found the shifting contingencies in a large and dynamic space such as VCS very agitating; a colleague who reflected comfort and ease highlighted my dis-ease even more. In the past, within the confines of a smaller class of students and without a collaborator, I jumped in quickly—probably as soon as I felt anxious. I wonder if this is where my impatience took root? It led to a managed and organized classroom culture, but was not necessarily educative as it restricted students’ “vision to the one path the teacher’s mind happens to approve” (Dewey, 2005, p. 104). Students enjoyed the atmosphere of my classroom, my personality, and creative project ideas. Now, through my research, I can see more clearly that my impatience left little space for a multiplicity of maturation schedules - “Results (external answers or solutions) may be hurried; processes may not be forced” (Dewey, 2005, p. 105). Through this awakening - “Pieces of humiliation have been slipping out, growing new sprouts of meaning at different sites” (Aoki, 2004, p. 49). It’s a humbling process. Opening to grow requires vulnerability—a letting go of the old, and a grieving for the consequences of my ignorance. I have always understood this in relation to students; now I know this, deeply, after living it myself.

The quest for developing a more reverential presence (Garrison & Rud, 2009) is a predominant theme in my journaling from the very first day of the Community School, and I must admit, it has become a profound and more complex mystery in the writing of this paper. As the life of my mind is revealed in field notes, impatience and restlessness seem stumbling blocks to presence:
I ask the kids what they were doing. They weren’t sure. We head down the path towards Murray. I feel tense - unsure of what we are embarking on. Murray talks about the formation of the valley–volcanic activity and glaciation. Small groups along the edge are highly distracted ignoring Murray’s story. I wonder how to engage them. I wonder how to add to the provocation so all students can be engaged. Murray leaves the listening to those who want to learn. I wonder how to engage those who are not listening. How to nudge? I wonder how this difference will impact our work together (Murray and I)?

I’m feeling like I’m unraveling. I’m feeling vulnerable. I’m working on not being anxious. I need to talk with Murray about my impatience. I need to respond more gently to some of the kids rather than objectifying them.

I notice that the students are noisy, busy and engaged. They finish at different times - some help others, some relax, some read, and others are rambunctious. I wonder, how do I manage this? So many students–almost sixty–so busy! Questions fill my mind. I wonder aloud to Murray - “How do I manage this ?” Murray responds, “You don’t manage it. Let it go. Be patient.

Letting go. Letting go. Letting go. The lunch of hope at the Mission was a lived experience for us all. It was messy. I had to hold my impulses back a lot. Holding, holding, holding.

Feeling tired–very low energy today. I remember waking up a lot last night – thinking and thinking and thinking about assessment. I also dreamed about a wrecking ball after a hard day yesterday at the library with some of the kids.
My initial reaction to reading these anecdotes is that I seem to look for “a fast way out the back door of the flux” (Caputo, 1987, p. 1). Well, maybe not a fast way, but a way out, none the less. Dwelling longer within the texts, my passion for solving problems, particularly relational ones, is illuminated; a student once enthusiastically announced that this was my “element” (Robinson, 2009). The processes of reconciliation and restitution do bring me great joy and satisfaction, and, in my practice, I can sense when relational rifts begin to appear. Through another lens, however, is it that I believe life is a problem to be solved? Or is it a mystery to enter into? Are there are times when issues or conflicts should be left alone? I whole-mindedly agree with Greenleaf’s (1977) wisdom - “One must accept that only venturing into uncertainty with faith that if one is adequately prepared to deal with the ambiguity, in the situation, the answer to the questions will come” (p. 202). I do not however seem to practice these ideas when I look in my notes. Do I lack faith? Not in myself, I don’t think, but maybe in others. Do I truly believe that answers will emerge in time - unrushed? I want to. I really do. Or, is my vocational call to be a catalyst, a spark plug, a lightning rod? Does my impatience speak to strength, vision, and passion? It’s probably all true, at times, in some ways. Maybe, it’s as Parker Palmer (1998) has come to understand, “I will never master this baffling vocation” (p. 9). Can I quiet my mind, my soul, and enter into this grand mystery of circumstances, of timing, of individuals? Or is it a matter of maintaining this wide-awake stance - being ever mindful of the tension inherent in teaching and learning? These questions, alone, lead me towards reverence.

What, then, has the first year of living in the tensionality of co-creating the Community School taught me as teacher? To cultivate the emergent, responsive and co-
created curriculum I value and desire to enact, attention must *first* be directed inward to soul (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 1998)–my soul - “Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse” (Palmer, 1998, p. 2). Inner attention (Dewey, 1904) is fundamental to growth as teacher - “It means insight into soul-action, ability to discriminate the genuine from the sham” (p. 8). Starratt (2013) reminds me of the criticality of relating “to the real, authentic you, not a mistaken perception of you or my own a priori wish of what you should be” (p. 55) asserting that there is a morality of presence and being half present, even to yourself, can cause harm (pp. 60-61).

Becoming aware, however, is strenuous and hidden work involving honesty, vulnerability, personal sacrifice and the decomposition of self-serving compulsions and self-interest (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 377) so that students in my care are provided what they need to grow and learn, as well as recognizing “that our students and their lives are often incomprehensible and uncontrollable” (Rud & Garrison, 2012, p. 14). It’s also critical to remember that I am never neutral - “[I] always intend, will, or think something” (Hansen, 2001, p. 25). I contain a multiplicity of experiences and presuppositions, strengths and limits, beliefs and resistances, emotions and thoughts - some that I am aware of and others I am blind to. When I re-read my data with this in mind, I notice that emotions and thoughts arising during tense moments provoked me to look inward; a fuller understanding of myself promised ever more mindful responses–a movement away from reactions that had the potential to numb or rock my students and colleagues off their moorings (Kessler, 1999, p. 163).

The clamouring of the external in a classroom, as well as the dominant discourse of schooling, is so distracting that it can be tempting to ignore the still, small voice inside
connecting me to my humanity (Aoki, 2004; Palmer, 1998), instigating pedagogical insensitivity to the particular needs of each student in my care (Noddings, 2003; van Manen, 2002). Dismally, the criticality of this pedagogical attunement to self and then others, is not even touched upon in the public school spaces I inhabit; it’s ignored. When it does happen to surface, immediately dries up conversation.

Palmer (1998) asserts that although the academy says it values multiple modes of knowing, it privileges one - “an ‘objective’ way of knowing that takes us into the ‘real’ world by taking us “out of ourselves” (p. 18). My experience at VCS has brought to light the legitimacy of this dynamic as Murray and I encountered criticism of our pedagogical stance, interpreted as permissive, lacking rigour and discipline - “You’ll never get an education at VCS” and viewed as an intentional critique of traditional teaching styles - “You think your way is the right way.” Living in the inhospitality and indifference to what matters deeply to me as teacher, as person, created and continues to create inner tension, provoking me to grow, as alongside my students, I too am vulnerable. I am ever questioning, ever interrogating, ever wondering. I am a lifelong learner.
5. Conclusion

The intent of this study is to provide data with soul (Brown, 2010). In doing so, I anticipate much fodder for continued conversations (Pinar, 2004) which complicate and challenge deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning. Surfacing beliefs that are not always inclusive of other perspectives, traditions, and experiences reduces teaching to implementing curriculum-as-pre-planned and learning to mere reproducing (Aoki, 2014, p. 362), pulling all involved up-short, positioned to question teaching/learning practices. This is the strength I find through practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003), and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) as the methodologies used to explore the research question: What is the lived curriculum we have co-created at the Community School? Within this study, I took up the role of teacher-researcher as well as portraitist. I chose the methodology of practitioner inquiry as it inspired “systemic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their school and classroom work” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 23) that provided space for me to explore how I/we theorize my/our work: the assumptions and decisions we made, and interpretations about student learning (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). The school was the research site, and the daily practices, events, and student responses to those experiences were the focus of the study. Students, parents, extended families, teachers, and community members were regarded as knowers, learners, and co-researchers (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), and each of us have contributed to co-constructing knowledge about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in order to chronicle the first year of the Community School. The portraits that emerge reveal unique individuals and their specific contributions to the makings of VCS, as well
as echoing and amplifying larger themes permeating the school as a whole. Thick descriptions of each narrative of experience take shape through detailed storytelling, drawing across my documented observations of the students over the year, including artifacts of learning, audio-recordings, journals and field notes, and photographs.

**Contributions To The Field**

This study intersects theory, research, and practice; an illustrative example of *emergent, responsive, and co-created* curriculum. It unpacks and connects notions such as reverence, mindfulness, social justice, student-centred learning, and living curriculum that embody both relational epistemology and social justice rooted in community. The Community School is a site of lived curriculum, a living ecology of learning and growth, and a road less travelled (Frost & Untermeyer, 1991). Documented and analyzed in this paper, VCS can be also be visited, and revisited; entered into as deeply as one chooses. All are welcome. On any given day, conversations can be had with children, youth, and adults - all of whom identify as learner and teacher. The resultant growth for all at the Community School is significant. Moreover, the conceptual framework of VCS, presented in this paper, can be explored, re-interpreted, and/or interrogated through one’s personal experiences at the site—fodder for complicated conversations (Pinar, 2004) leading to more vibrant and inspiriting ways of teaching and learning that serve children, their families, and the greater community (Aoki, 2004; Dewey, 1902; Greene, 1995). This is a significant contribution to the field of education—beyond theory to praxis.

A second contribution to the field, through this study, is an illustration of the tension-filled and complex living that *emergent, responsive, and co-created* curriculum demands. This attention to diverse ways of being and doing demands a vulnerability and
openness on the part of teacher: humility to admit your limits; self-knowledge to understand and adjust responses to emerging tensions; pedagogical love that stimulates change so another can grow; and the agency, stamina, and passion to continue developing as teacher—“cultivating new dispositions, knowledge, attitudes, and outlooks” (Hansen, 2001, p. 44). Without substantive inner soul work (Kessler, 2000)—knowing what you know and feeling what you feel (Van der kolk, 2014, p. 27)—it doesn’t seem possible that one could teach in these ways - it certainly would not have been possible for me. The emotion that emerges from any diverse community of learners in any given moment is unpredictable, provocative, and messy requiring a spontaneity that is often uncertain and nuanced. In order to meet traditional expectations for orderly and controlled classrooms (by the system, community, and parents), the emotional must be separated from the cognitive - a privileging of logic and materialism on the part of teacher, and compliance and performance on the part of student. Without an educational culture (on the continuum from Ministry of Education to daily classroom living) that is non judgmental, reverential (Rud & Garrison, 2010), and openly supportive of diverse ways of being and doing in the world (which include mess and surprises), it will be difficult for 21st century practices to take root.

A third, and final contribution to the field, is the gathering of stories detailing and describing student journeys within the emergent, responsive, co-created culture of VCS. These tales echo and amplify larger themes permeating VCS as a whole including: honest, vulnerable storytelling; wholehearted and whole-minded dialogic encounters; the damage done to living things by underlying mechanistic metaphors; and the unpredictable complexity of authentic growth. These significances are harvested from the four portraits,
and have the potential to inspire future chronicling of diverse student experiences in classrooms.

**Limitations Of This Study**

This work is nested in the particulars of the Community School—one program of fifty-six students. Moreover, the focus of my study has been on thick description using a qualitative lens; my voice and biases are deeply embedded throughout, despite efforts to make them explicit. Resultantly, this is not a comparative study and therefore is not generalizable. In addition, I have been mindful of including other voices from VCS in the paper; unfortunately, all learners could not be included in the portraits due to limitations of time, the scope of this thesis, and my intellectual stamina. Many students have requested to be portrayed in the future.

Teacher research is research for teachers by teachers, yet a limitation of this study is that emergent, responsive, and co-created curriculum can be threatening to teachers in a traditional system unfamiliar or not comfortable in taking up these theoretical approaches. Despite colleagues being deeply frustrated by emerging problems such as truancy, online learning options, and declining enrollment, there is a limited audience for this work. A challenge for practitioner researchers, such as myself, is tempering our enthusiasm so colleagues feel safe to ask questions and wonder about the educational possibilities inspired by examples such as VCS. These conversations may hold the potential for school transformation.

**Next Steps For Research**

Through the portraiture, family voices began to emerge within the research. In sharing the research with these participants, it became apparent of the potential of
including parents as co-learners, and even co-researchers. It’s not unusual to have parents as partners in primary; within this study, we see the willingness for parents of youth to engage in their children’s educational journeys.

Moreover, questions that emerge from this study that could be taken up by practitioner researchers (perhaps in partnership with community based researchers) are:

- Regardless of the shifts in curriculum that are happening across North America and the world, what would motivate a teacher to change his practice— to live curriculum rather than enforce it— to pay attention to rather than ignore inner realities (of students and self)?
- What is required for practicing teachers to step outside their comfort zones, and experiment with 21st century learning practices which are often messy and unpredictable?

Next Steps In Research For Me

Studies are calling me to keep moving forward in my scholarship. I remain passionately concerned about social justice and school transformation— even more so after the writing of this paper. I will continue the collaborative research with Dr. Leyton Schnellert - working with teacher candidates to consider the theoretical framework embodied at the Community School, and Dr. Margaret Macintyre Latta— co-researching the curricular enactment at VCS. My dream is to pursue a PhD exploring the interplay between attachment, trauma, brain development, and ecologies most productive for learning through a Deweyan lens. In any future research, I would like to incorporate more voices from students, parents, and community members; including them as co-researchers and co-writers would be exciting.
I would like to continue any future research within the collegial partnership of Leyton Schnellert, Margaret Macintyre Latta, and Murray Sasges; I greatly value our wholehearted and whole-minded conversations. Without academic structures and critical friends like these to provoke, support, and sustain me, I would not have the strength to contradict the systems that I presently find myself rooted in.

This is not just a study; practitioner inquiry has been an opportunity to explore and come to understand the ideas in theory that resonate within me, and how we are living them in practice at VCS. I now more deeply understand the tensions in the system, and offer, hopefully, one explanation of why educational systems continue to perpetuate standardized approaches, as well as the ideal of the detached, distant and systematic teacher (Freire, 1996; Noddings, 2003) and the cooperative, engaged student. I also more deeply understand inner tensions as teacher. It has taken time—the year of research and the year of writing—to interrogate myself fully: to discover what I understand, and explore what I don’t understand. With this helpful and hopeful knowledge, I can more effectively navigate the system as teacher: to have compassion for resistance, look for openings, wait patiently, and then step into them reverentially (Rud & Garrison, 2010) and expectantly.

My next steps will be to write several portraits this spring focusing upon students who have shown compelling growth and development in their second year at the Community School; unique individuals and their specific contributions to VCS. The narratives will continue to echo and amplify larger themes permeating the school as a whole. I would also like to present students, colleagues, parents, and mentors with the challenge to take up the writing of their own story or a portrait of another student whose
story has inspired, inspired, and/or provoked them - to be presented to the community at the end of the school year.

**An End And A Beginning**

I am a teacher. Since embarking on this journey, I have developed a thicker and more reverent conception of this work that I am called to; the inner soul work (Kessler, 2000) required to embody the very vulnerability that is required for all learning (Macintyre Latta, 2015). Could this mindful practice be the social justice I have always felt in my heart? Not doing messianic work, but living deeply in the messiness of community? Not imagining myself as an expert, but taking up risky challenges alongside students, colleagues, mentors, and parents as we expose our fragile, authentic, emerging selves to the world (Neufeld & Mate, 2004)? More than ever, I conceptualize the work of teacher as mysterious, and although the images of ecology have always resonated deep within, I am only coming to understand the humility required to create fertile spaces for learning and growth in a school setting. I accept the humility to wholeheartedly and whole-mindedly embrace the non-rational, intuitive (Noddings, 1984), relational (Macintyre Latta, 2013), and patient in an institutional setting that privileges, and thus values, logic, materialism, compliance, and performance. The Community School is becoming an example to other educators in British Columbia of how trusting, really trusting in principles of learning like patience and time stimulates deep root growth and fruitful thinking that sustains itself. I wonder - could this be one conception of Greene’s (1995) imaginings of education that is “human and decent and just” (p.1)? The sustenance the portraits reveal throughout, give lived expression to Greene’s question for me.
As a teacher-researcher, pulled up short again and again as the portraits emerged, I have been awakened and resultantly humbled by the fact that I too had come to believe that I knew what was best for students (hooks, 1994; Sirolli, 1999; Y. Zhao, personal communication, January 30, 2015). Conditioned by the dominant discourse myself - in family, church, community, and in school - whenever I experienced tension I actively sought to control the situation—grabbing the reins, quieting my anxiousness, and focusing upon solutions. Before graduate school, it had never occurred to me that knowledge is provisional, textual, multiple, and never finished or complete (Ellsworth, 1997); instead, I prided myself on immediate re-action to tension. I had learned to effectively use creativity, humour, and play (which don’t appear authoritarian); still, I did not offer students an educative way through the tension - modeling instead, that stress and uncertainty are to be avoided—“arresting or distorting the growth of further development” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). As a result of this insight, I am presently mindful that in spite of enthusiastic and effortful dreaming, theorizing, producing, practicing, reflecting, refining over a quarter century of teaching practice, there will always be things that I am not yet aware of; things that I am in the process of making sense of; and things that I perceive and do not yet have words for.

As a result of this study, I now believe that moments in a classroom, which are tense and problematic, are also ripe for powerful personal and professional learning; as challenges, difficulties, and conflict emerge, diverse responses can be co-created, experimented with, practiced, and reflected upon. I am becoming more aware of what Greene (1995) may mean when she speaks of openings, possibilities, and “about moving in quest and in pursuit” (p. 15). My portraits, both of the youth and of me, attend to many
such stirrings; this is a significant part of living the curriculum at the Community School. Although, I continue to experience inner tension, I am finding ways to move through it productively both as learner and teacher. Surprisingly, my dream of a revolution in teaching towards ethical practices that nurture growth in each and every student has begun with me—facing my teacher. I am learning to welcome the unforeseen (Rud, 1995; Nouwen, 1975); to make sense of organic particulars as they emerge (Vanier, 1979); and to look forward, albeit tentatively and at times even anxiously, to exploring depths as yet uncharted, unknown (Nim, 1950). As a result of this study, I am learning to practice the mindfulness of slowing down, watching carefully, holding back, and barely moving (Palmer, 1990)—particularly in those moments of inner tension as each day, alongside students, colleagues, parents, and community members, we live an emergent, responsive, and co-created curriculum that inspires social justice and school transformation.
Epilogue

*I had a dream about your students last night:*

I was at a liquor store and they started to walk in
as a demonstration to get kids more healthy and active.
Barak was holding this tall stalk of kale and was ripping off pieces
to share like it was communion.
Teresa got up on a chair to make a speech
and Sean was singing an old protest song in the background like *We Shall Overcome*.
Then a larger group of kids entered
holding medieval style baskets of fresh vegetables.
I wanted to lecture them about being in a liquor store,
but they were so passionate that the other adults gave them a standing ovation
(M. Niedballa, personal communication, June 15, 2015).
References


