

**“No Parent? No School:”
A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents
in an Alternative Public School Community in Québec, Canada**

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Abstract

In this paper-based dissertation, I narratively inquire into parents' experiences within a publicly funded alternative elementary school in Québec, Canada. Narrative inquiry, understood as both a qualitative research methodology and a way of studying experience through stories, offered a way of attending to how parents experience participation over time, across place, and in relation with children, teachers, and the broader school community. Living alongside research participants involved sustained conversations, classroom and schoolyard encounters, observations within project spaces, and ongoing attentiveness to the relational and ethical dimensions of experience as they unfolded in everyday life. This study takes place at Mockingbird Elementary School, a school affiliated with the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ), a network of publicly funded alternative schools grounded in community participation, collective responsibility, and project-based learning. Within this context, parents are structurally embedded within the life of the school through weekly project-based learning, evaluative conversations, committee work, and collective school governance. Between March 2025 and April 2026, I engaged with four parents—Annie, Mia, William, and Claire—whose experiences reflected differing moments of entry, belonging, uncertainty, and transition within the school community. Three interrelated papers extend this narrative inquiry. The first explores participation as intertwined family-school-community making, attending to the relational, emotional, and moral work involved in sustaining collective life within an alternative school community. In the second paper, I think with Hannah Arendt's (1958) notion of spaces of appearance to inquire narratively into how parents come to appear before others within collective and relational school spaces, where visibility, judgement, plurality, and exposure are continuously negotiated. The third lingers with relational ethics to explore how relationships between researcher and participants are negotiated within the fragile and contested in-between spaces of institutions and narrative inquiry. By attending to parents' lived experiences at Mockingbird, this dissertation contributes to scholarship in narrative inquiry, relational ethics, and family-school-community relationships. It also (re)considers and (re)imagines anew dominant understandings of parental engagement in education, offering possibilities for teacher education and educational communities seeking more relational, participatory, and socially democratic ways of living together in schools and beyond.

Résumé

Dans cette thèse par articles, j'explore narrativement les expériences de parents au sein d'une école primaire alternative publique au Québec, Canada. L'enquête narrative, comprise à la fois comme une méthodologie de recherche qualitative et comme une manière d'étudier l'expérience à travers les récits, a offert une façon de porter attention à la manière dont les parents vivent leur participation au fil du temps, à travers les lieux, et en relation avec les enfants, les enseignant-es et la communauté scolaire élargie. Vivre aux côtés des participant-es à la recherche a impliqué des conversations soutenues, des rencontres dans les classes et les cours d'école, des observations dans les espaces de projets, ainsi qu'une attention continue aux dimensions relationnelles et éthiques de l'expérience telles qu'elles se déployaient dans la vie quotidienne. Cette étude se déroule à l'école primaire Mockingbird, une école affiliée au Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec (RÉPAQ), un réseau d'écoles publiques alternatives ancré dans la participation communautaire, la responsabilité collective et l'apprentissage par projets. Dans ce contexte, les parents sont structurellement intégrés à la vie de l'école à travers les projets hebdomadaires, les rencontres évaluatives, le travail en comité et la cogestion de l'école. Entre mars 2025 et avril 2026, j'ai cheminé aux côtés de quatre parents — Annie, Mia, William et Claire — dont les expériences témoignaient de différents moments d'entrée, d'appartenance, d'incertitude et de transition au sein de la communauté scolaire. Trois articles interreliés prolongent cette enquête narrative. Le premier explore la participation comme un faire famille-école-communauté, en portant attention au travail relationnel, émotionnel et moral impliqué dans le maintien d'une vie collective au sein d'une communauté scolaire alternative. Dans le deuxième article, je pense avec la notion d'espaces d'apparition de Hannah Arendt (1958) afin d'explorer narrativement la manière dont les parents viennent à (ap)paraître devant les autres dans des espaces scolaires collectifs et relationnels, où la visibilité, le jugement, la pluralité et l'exposition sont continuellement négociés. Le troisième article s'attarde aux enjeux de l'éthique relationnelle afin d'explorer comment les relations entre la chercheuse et les personnes participantes se négocient dans les espaces fragiles et contestés de l'entre-deux institutionnel et de l'enquête narrative. En portant attention aux expériences vécues des parents à Mockingbird, cette thèse contribue aux travaux en enquête narrative, en éthique relationnelle et aux recherches portant sur les relations famille-école-communauté. Elle permet également de (re)considérer et de (ré)imaginer autrement les compréhensions dominantes de l'engagement parental en

éducation, en ouvrant des possibilités pour la formation à l'enseignement et pour les communautés éducatives qui cherchent des manières plus relationnelles, participatives et socialement démocratiques de vivre ensemble, à l'école et au-delà.

Preface¹

*Playfulness is an attitude that carries us through the activity,
a playful attitude, that turns the activity into play—
involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool,
openness of self-construction or reconstruction and to
construction or reconstruction of the “worlds” we inhabit
playfully—
as a place of imagination.
(Lugones, 1987, p. 17)*

This work was created to give life to a vision of relationship, imagination, and possibility, and to recognize parents as co-composers of the lived and living stories of their children’s education.

What is (re)told here comes in fragments—ordinary moments lived, storied, and carried across time, place, and relation. This is not a complete story, nor is it meant to be. It remains unfinished, still becoming. Some stories slip away; others are set down gently and left at the edges.

I invite you, dear Reader, to approach this text with patience and with spirit and intent of playfulness. To read in this way is to choose to dwell with ambiguity, uncertainty, and perplexity, and to travel with and alongside others into their worlds without seeking ownership or mastery. I hope you will linger with both what is offered and what is absent and, imagine how your own stories may begin to move in relation to these pages, through stories lived, told, retold, and relived (Caine, 2002).

¹ This doctoral dissertation is an original work by Melissa J. Daoust. The research project received ethics approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (File No. S-03-25-11313; REG 11313). This dissertation is presented in an article format and includes three manuscripts. Melissa J. Daoust conducted the research, data collection, analysis, and primary writing for all manuscripts included in this dissertation. Paper 1 is currently under review at the [School Community Journal](#). Melissa J. Daoust is the first author. The second author, Vera Caine, contributed to the conceptual development of the manuscript and provided critical revisions. The third author, Marie-Hélène Brunet, also provided critical revisions. Both served as doctoral supervisors. Paper 2 will be submitted to the [Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education](#) following review of the dissertation by members of the doctoral committee. Melissa J. Daoust is the first author. Vera Caine contributed to the conceptual development of the manuscript and provided critical revisions in her role as doctoral supervisor. Paper 3 will be submitted to [Qualitative Inquiry](#) following review of the dissertation by the external examiner. Melissa J. Daoust is the sole author.

Notes on Reading²

Throughout this document, I use ∞∩ to mark moments of pause—thresholds between stories; ideas; relations. These marks signal in-between spaces where I intentionally slow the reading, attending to what is unfolding, shifting, or left unresolved. In narrative inquiry, such pauses matter: meaning is carried in what is told and lived; in the spaces where stories brush up against one another, where words falter, and where ethical attention is required.

At times, I name individuals who are not research participants for this study. These references allude to people within my narrative inquiry response community whose presence offered relational spaces to think narratively alongside participants' stories and my own lived and living experience. Their names signal moments where knowledge and ways of knowing were shaped through shared reflection, conversation, and ethical attention rather than through data collection alone.

Multiple font styles are used to signal shifts in voice, position, and mode of writing. These typographical shifts are intentional, inviting the Reader to attend to the multiplicity through which the narrative inquiry is told and lived. Visual elements, created by me unless otherwise noted, appear throughout the dissertation as narrative inquiry field texts. They carry experience, invite response, and open spaces of meaning beyond what words can hold.

²*Artificial Intelligence Usage Note:* Artificial intelligence tools were occasionally used to assist with translation between French and English throughout the writing process. All conceptual framing, analysis, interpretation, narrative account composition, and scholarly decisions presented in this dissertation remain the sole work of the author.



Visual Field Text 1

This photograph, taken in Trois-Rivières
(Abénaki and Atikamekw territory),
wanders and wonders with beauty
of each space and place along
le fleuve Saint-Laurent,
May 2026.

Land Acknowledgement

This dissertation was written alongside the Saint-Lawrence River, within stories, spirits, and ecologies that long precede my own. As a descendant of European lineages whose family histories trace back generations along this river, I continue to (un)learn what it means to live more attentively in relation within these spaces and places alongside my children. I offer gratitude to the human and more-than-human relations whose presence, patience, and teachings continue to shape my understanding of who I am and who I am becoming.

Table of Stories

Abstract.....	ii
Résumé.....	iii
Preface.....	v
Notes on Reading	vi
Land Acknowledgement.....	viii
Table of Visual Stories.....	xi
Prologue	xii
Introduction: Beginning in the Midst	1
Entering the Field: A Story of First Encounter	5
Returning to the Story: From First Encounter to Research Puzzle	8
Personally Justifying the Research Puzzle.....	10
References.....	12
Chapter One: Socially and Theoretically Justifying the Research Puzzle	14
Historical Context of Alternative Schools in Québec.....	20
Current Situation of Alternative Schools in Québec.....	22
Conceptual Pause: Defining Key Terms.....	25
Types of Parental Contributions	26
Evidence of Parental Contributions on School Activities.....	29
Complexities of Parental Engagement.....	31
The Relationship Between Teachers and Parents	33
Summary of Personal, Practical, Social, and Theoretical Justifications.....	35
References.....	36
Chapter Two: Turning towards Narrative Inquiry.....	49
Relationships in Narrative Inquiry.....	52
Transition to Field at an Alternative School in Québec.....	53
Transition from Field to Field Text	54
Moving from Field Texts to Interim and Final Research Texts.....	56
Ethical Considerations	57
Relationships Alongside Response Communities	59
What is to Come Next?	61
References.....	63
Chapter Three: Annie's Narrative Account.....	66
Chapter Four: Mia's Narrative Account.....	107
Chapter Five: William's Narrative Account	163
Chapter Six: Claire's Narrative Account	217
Interlude One: Walking In Together	267
Chapter Seven: Paper 1.....	271
Interlude Two: Between Lingering Breaths.....	289

Chapter Eight: Paper 2	292
Interlude Three: A Moment of <i>Accalmie</i>	310
Chapter Nine: Paper 3.....	313
Chapter Ten: So Long, For Now	331
Narrative Inquiry and Thought-in-Relation	333
Wondering What Could be Otherwise	334
Narrative Inquiry as a Relational Methodology.....	338
Concluding Remark	342
References	343
Acknowledgements and Dédicace.....	345
References.....	346
Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval and Renewal	361
Appendix B: Consent Form for Research Participant (English Version Follows)	363
Appendix C: Consent Form for Other Parents (English Version Follows).....	369
Appendix D: Consent Form for Teachers (Observations and English Version Follows) ..	373
Appendix E: Consent Form for Teachers (Interviews and English Version Follows)	377

Table of Visual Stories

Visual Field Text 1.....	vii
Visual Field Text 2.....	xiv
Visual Field Text 3.....	14
Visual Field Text 4.....	49
Visual Field Text 5.....	67
Visual Field Text 6.....	96
Visual Field Text 7.....	104
Visual Field Text 8.....	105
Visual Field Text 9.....	139
Visual Field Text 10.....	160
Visual Field Text 11.....	162
Visual Field Text 12.....	162
Visual Field Text 13.....	214
Visual Field Text 14.....	215
Visual Field Text 15.....	218
Visual Field Text 16.....	220
Visual Field Text 17.....	228
Visual Field Text 18.....	232
Visual Field Text 19.....	236
Visual Field Text 20.....	243
Visual Field Text 21.....	253
Visual Field Text 22.....	262
Visual Field Text 23.....	264
Visual Field Text 24.....	265

Prologue

*I woke up feelin' great
the birds are in the trees
they're singin' me a melody
my head is on straight
my heart is in peace
my soul is incredibly
ready to change history
it's a good day
to fight the system*

*(Shungudzo, 2020, playing softly in the background
while reading through a version of this dissertation, May 2026)*

It is 10:32 a.m. on a bright but chilly October morning in 2025. The kind of morning where sunlight spills across my desk, yet the air still holds that crisp edge that makes you pull your sweater a little tighter. I have just finished a virtual meeting with one of my doctoral supervisors, Marie-Hélène—a gentle check-in to see how I am, how the work is unfolding, how I am unfolding within it.

The morning, though, began like a small storm.

Neither of the kids slept well—most likely because of the *collation spéciale* I made for them the night before, right before bed. They know that when papa is away, the rules loosen, and the house transforms into a small celebration. We go to bed later. We whisper and giggle louder. They know that *maman* will prepare a *collation spéciale*—last night, pear and chocolate fondue.

I can still see them: both sitting directly on the kitchen table, bare feet swinging, a plate between them littered with half-eaten cut pieces of pears. The chocolate, once rich and glossy, has vanished from the plate and reappeared across their faces—Louis with a streak through his hair, his sister with sticky smudges between her toes. They are laughing uncontrollably like accomplices in joy. Louis, this two-year old precious heart, leans over, finger pressed to his lips—*shhhh*—as if to remind his older sister that this is our secret, that papa must never know about *maman*'s mischief.

That image—pure, unfiltered delight—is engraved in my mind.

Click. A snapshot.

☺

I carry it with me as the morning unfolds. The sound of their laughter. The sweetness of, and literally on, their faces. The feeling of being right there, in the middle of their joy.

Remember the experience, remember the story, I tell myself.

I carry it, too, into the meeting I have just finished—into the moment where I admitted that I have been feeling anxious, an uneasiness that sits somewhere between my ribs and my throat, because when I think about this dissertation—this very document I jokingly titled earlier this week “*PhD document... yeah right*”—I realize that I have no clear sense yet of what it should be, nor what it might become. I cannot yet see how its shape, its coherence, its warm and cold colors and the stories of this narrative inquiry puzzle; my stories, research participants’ stories, response community’s stories, and stories that have been lived together across time and place—might, *one day*, fit together into something *whole*.

This is *so* beautifully new to me.

I admitted, too, that these past few weeks had not been as productive as I hoped. I had planned carefully: writing blocks neatly arranged in my calendar, hours reserved for advancing ideas, for filling the blank page with words that might eventually lead somewhere, words that might eventually be read by someone.

Yet the writing resisted me. The page remained heavy, *expectant*.

I gathered everything I had written thus far—the proposal, the ethics forms, the work-in-progress narrative accounts, a very rough draft of an article—and placed them in one document.

I drafted a cover page, jotted notes of what I wanted to include in the acknowledgement and dedication sections and created a table of contents.

Maybe, I thought, seeing it altogether would remind me of how much I have already lived, learned, and carried forward.

It was an act of *touching* something, really—
 a way of holding on to the invisible progress—
 often hiding behind doubt and uncertainty³—
the magical; the mysterious Ω the mystical

³ After sending this prologue to Vera, she wrote: *Maybe end with something like this*: I write this prologue as a way to show the unfolding process of my work. A reminder to both me and the Reader that the work is slow, filled with uncertainty, and a sense that it will always be unfinished. Perhaps it is like the *collation spéciale* – the joy and laughter live so close to the stories we live and the stories that are meant to be kept secret. The secrets that show us the extraordinary work required to move ideas forward, to taste the sweetness of having figured out something—holding on

to
 the memories,
 while knowing that each time
 there is always more
 to be
discovered. (December 21, 2025)



Visual Field Text 2

A visual field text lingering at the threshold of beginnings—
 something, someone, somewhere, somehow, sometime—
 on the verge of blossoming.

Introduction: Beginning in the Midst

*One spring morning, Roman had a wonderful feeling.
It was a feeling that even ish words and ish drawings could not capture.
He decided not to capture it. Instead, he simply savored it...
(Peter H. Reynolds, taken from the book "Ish")*

I have written elsewhere that I am a sprinter. This is also how I move through things—with bursts of energy, urgency, and focus. I crave the exhilaration of giving everything in one go, before collapsing knowing I have poured myself out completely. Writing a dissertation, though, is not a sprint. It is a long *distance* run where the finish line is often hidden far beyond sight. I still do not know how to find that steady rhythm, how to keep running when there is still no ribbon in sight—only the quiet endurance of not yet arriving.

I have written a master's thesis before (2020), one that was shaped and grounded in narrative inquiry. I still see the first chapter I wrote in the thesis, the narrative beginnings, and a smile gathers at the corner of my face. Five years later, I recognize how differently I would tell—and live—these stories today.

This doctoral dissertation is inviting me to notice the stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). On this beautiful October day—I am wide-awake¹ (Greene, 1995) to how they shape the ways I come to know, care, and move alongside others. What once felt settled unfolds with complexity; what was once lived and told with ease now calls for retelling and reliving.

These stories do not

re-solve.

They remain

in motion.

¹ Greene (1995), drawing on Wallace Stevens, offers a metaphor of the blue guitar for seeing *otherwise*:

They said, "you have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "but play, you must,"

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar

Of things exactly as they are"

Throw away the lights, the definitions,

And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,

But do not use the rotted names.

You as you are? You are yourself.

The blue guitar surprises you (pp. 19-20).

An ongoing act
 of being and
 becoming
 in experience;
in relation.

As a narrative inquirer, I begin and end each narrative inquiry in the midst; in the *ish*. We are part of the metaphorical parade (Geertz, 1995), immersed in the phenomenon under study, simultaneously making and remaking our lives. Narrative beginnings serve as the anchorage for this process: a space to dwell in the stories that shape who we are and who we are becoming; a space to linger in the past, inhabit the present, and imagine the futures of the stories that carry us.

Clandinin (2023) cautioned us that this work is too often not given sufficient time and attention. As she wrote, “without autobiographical narrative inquiry, our studies can lead to work that is too technical or too certain. Beginning with autobiographical narrative inquiry allows us to see that we, too, are under study in the inquiry” (p. 62). This reflexive attention to how our memories and our imaginations are interwoven into the storied experiences shaping our research puzzle—and into how we imagine living alongside our research participants—is an *ongoing* process. In turning towards this work—inquiring into where I come from, where I am headed, and with whom I world-travel²—I begin to discern the contours of who I am and who I am becoming. This becoming is not solitary; it unfolds alongside people and more-than human ecosystems³. Attending to relations and stories that are told and lived in place, clarifies not only who I am and am becoming, but *why*—why some questions persist and why certain stories demand my sustained and careful attention. It is here, in this reflective and relational return, that

² Lugones (1987) wrote:

I can offer some characteristics that serve to distinguish between a “world,” a utopia, a possible world in the philosophical sense, and a world view. By a “world” I do not mean a utopia at all. A utopia does not count as a world in my sense. The “worlds” that I am talking about are possible. [...] For something to be a “world” in my sense it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this “world” met in some other “world” and now have in this “world” in imagination. [...] One can “travel” between these “worlds” and one can inhabit more than one of these “worlds” at the very same time. (pp. 9-10)

³ At the end of Donald’s dissertation (2009), he wrote: “I view (re)connection with land and place as a critical and urgent public education project” (pp. 467-468). Donald, a teacher and descendant of the amiskwaciwiyniwak (Beaver Hills people) papachase nêhiyawak, situates becoming not only as an individual or societal trajectory, but as a form of kinship and ecological relationality—one that unfolds through renewed relations with land and place, as articulated through Indigenous wisdom.

the phenomena I seek to understand begins to surface carefully, ready to be made visible to a wider audience.

☐°∩

My earliest memory of research—of what it means to think with, from, through research—takes me back to a course I had in Cégep. The teacher was completing her master's studies at McGill University in Sport Psychology. I can no longer remember her name, but I still see her face clearly: delicate features, short straight blond-white hair. She was an Olympian swimmer, if I remember correctly, and she studied coaching in this sport. It was in her class that I first felt the quiet thrill of *liberté*—the freedom to learn what I truly wanted to, in a place that so often decides for us what is worth knowing and how it will be acquired. She had invited us to imagine a project, to step outside—into the world, among people—to talk, to ask, to observe. I chose the Cégep gym. Outside the classroom, though still within the same building.

I wanted to write about how certain *gym-type boys* spoke to, or acted around, girls in that space. I also wrote about preferring to exercise where I worked at that time—the place restricted to people who identifies as female. There was a lot of pink at that gym. It was, I think, the first school assignment I had not dreaded completing. I believe that was when I decided I would become a researcher—one who could also teach about research. Someone told me I would need a PhD to do that, and I remember thinking: *That is what I will get*. I had absolutely no idea what a doctoral degree was, yet the conviction was there. When I began my undergraduate studies in education, I remember scanning the list of professors in the department and writing to three of them to ask for a meeting. I wanted to do research. One of them replied. She had just been hired as an exercise psychologist, and she was incredible. Although I enjoyed my courses, it was the *side-projects*—the research practicums—that kept me coming back to school and persevere through my undergraduate degree. Spending time in that lab kept me anchored; it kept me driven.

I was first introduced to the possibilities of narrative inquiry during my master's. A friend suggested that I explore narrative inquiry after I shared with him who I hoped to work alongside for my research project. He thought narrative inquiry might fit with the kind of questions I was already asking—the kind that came from stories, from experience, from relationships. We were both working with the same professor, whose work was in narrative inquiry; yet I did not know this at the time. I had wanted to work alongside this professor because Lee was such an

extraordinary teacher, and I appreciated how he talked about the lives of teachers, as if each one of them had unique stories to tell, to write, to live.

I still remember the email my friend Michael had sent after we talked. Attached in his email was a dissertation written by a student at the University of Alberta, under the supervision of Professors Vera Caine and D. Jean Clandinin. I remember opening that attachment—perhaps because of the time it took to load—a document that had more than 500 pages. As I read the introductory chapter, beginning with a story, it was as if a window had just opened. The air felt different. I am not alone, I imagine, in finding it difficult to name the sensations that ripple through the body in moments of wide-awakeness (Greene, 1995). That sudden rush that moves through—a trembling recognition—a current idiom of knowing before thought catches up, a glass shattering somewhere inside, a shiver running the length of the spine and leaving a wake of goosebumps in its path.

I fell in love with narrative inquiry.

What a strange thing to admit—I know. How could I fall in love with a methodology, a phenomenon, something I could not touch, see, taste, smell, nor hear? Yet—I did. I think I fell in love with what this methodology has to offer—its possibilities, the people writing the stories, the words themselves. In reading them—the words, the lines, the stories of people in relation—I felt as though my own thoughts and stories were being mirrored back to me. In my first introduction to narrative inquiry, I found home. There was no other way, I remember thinking as a master’s student. This was how I wanted to do my very first “official” research project (Daoust, 2020).

When I finished the second degree, all I wanted was to propose another narrative inquiry. I wanted to keep inquiring in this space, to continue living alongside people and other narrative inquirers who had already given me so much—to pour more care, more attention, more of myself into the stories I was fortunate to live alongside.

As I entered the doctoral program—completing coursework, passing comprehensive examination, and moving through expected milestones—I was still searching with whom I wished to live and inquire alongside. What I did know, though, was that narrative inquiry needed to anchor my work. I wanted it to appear among the keywords of what I would eventually write—not only as a methodological designation, but as an invitation to others, searching as I once did and continue to do, to find their way towards this phenomenon and its possibilities for

“people in relation *with* people in relation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189; emphasis added).

Entering the Field: A Story of First Encounter

I name this story:

Hunger Games: The Alternative School Edition

"Je reviens tantôt, ok bébé? Maman va venir te donner un bisou en arrivant," I say, crouching down to her level. ("I'll be back later, okay, sweetheart? Mommy will give you a kiss when I get home.")

"Tu t'en vas où, maman?" she asks, her big blue eyes looking up at me. ("Where are you going, Mommy?")

"Je m'en vais à une école qui sera peut-être ta future école à toi," I reply with a smile. ("I'm going to a school that might be your future school.")

Before I can say more, she darts forward and wraps her little arms around me, squeezing tightly in one of her big-girl hug. I breath her in before standing and heading out the door.

I pull into the parking lot of the school we are considering for Sam. The headlights catch the edges of the playground, casting long, familiar shadows. Schools have always held a particular feeling for me.

I have walked through so many thus far, in my short lifetime—first as a toddler accompanying my mother who was present at the school my older siblings attended, then as a student and as a student teacher, later as a teacher, and even during travels, drawn to explore schools in unfamiliar places. Each time I enter a school, something, wordless, moves through me—a pull between belonging and vulnerability. It is a quiet, insistent tension that unsettles me, nonetheless draws me in.

The engine is silent now.

The weight of this visit feels different. It occurs to me that this could be the place where my daughter—and soon after, my son—will spend much of their childhood. A place that will shape their days, their friendships, their love for learning, their sense of self.

Before becoming a parent, I could never have imagined the sheer number of decisions that would rest on my shoulders, nor how each one carries the power to ripple through their lives in ways I can only begin to fathom.

Tonight, as I gaze through the windshield at this stillness, I am struck by the enormity—and the tenderness—of this moment. I take a deep breath, reach for my backpack, and step out of the car.

A woman with bright red lipstick and a wide, welcoming smile greets me at the door.

« Bienvenue! » (“Welcome!”) she says warmly. I smile back, assuming she is a teacher.

« Mon nom est Myriam, je suis un parent ici. Nous faisons partie du comité d’admission » (“My name is Myriam, I’m a parent here. We’re part of the school’s admission committee.”)

She looks at me closely. « Es-tu enregistrée ? Il faut que tu t’inscrives—cette rencontre est mandatoire si tu veux que ton enfant vienne ici » (“Are you registered? You need to sign in—this meeting is mandatory if you want to enroll your child.”)

I nod, confirming that I am.

Behind me, more people file in as we are directed towards the gymnasium. Inside, a sea of chairs awaits—more than a hundred. There is no way they will all be filled, I think, as I choose a seat in the middle of the third row.

The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m., leaving me fifteen minutes to wait. I glance around, taking in the space.

Nearby, a mother chatting with a small group catches my attention. I overhear one woman say, « C’est ma cinquième visite d’école alternative cette année. On va s’essayer à toutes les écoles, et un moment donné ils vont piger notre nom, j’en suis convaincue » (“This is my fifth alternative school visit this year. We’ll try them all, and eventually they’re bound to draw our name—I’m convinced.”)

Another parent chimes in, « je suis allée à celle de la semaine dernière, tsé, à la nouvelle école. Le programme est juste incroyable » (*“I went to the one last week, you know, the new school. The program is just incredible.”*)

A third adds with a laugh, « Ouin, mais tsé, on le sait ben qu’elle va finir dans une école privée. C’est comme Hunger Games, le jeu des écoles alternatives » (*“Yeah, but we all know she’ll end up in a private school. It’s like Hunger Games, the alternative school edition.”*)

By now, it is nearly 7:00 p.m., and the room is full. I do not see an empty chair left. « En plus, il y a juste 10 places disponibles ici, and les critères de selections dependent de chaque école » (*“Plus, there are only ten spots available here, and the selection process really depends on each school,”*) she continues.

The hum of voices fades as someone steps in front of the large screen at the front of the room.

I walk, more like skip, back to my car after the presentation, the cool air brushing against me, my thoughts still lingering inside those walls. I slide into the driver’s seat and call my husband, Fred.

“There’s something about this school,” I tell him. “I could see myself there—standing alongside the parents who spoke. Even the children spoke. They spoke about their school. A school shaped for them, each one of them—You know?”

As I continue my drive along the St-Lawrence River, reflecting on what was presented tonight, I think back to my own childhood. I picture my mom at the elementary school, her presence so ordinary then, but striking now in hindsight. She was present at school, managing the library, helping out in classrooms, stepping in wherever she was needed. It was not just about helping... it was about being part of something we (my sister, my brother, and I) were part of.

That memory stays with me as I wonder:
How are parents positioned in schools today?

(Melissa’s Research Journal Entry, September 2024)

Returning to the Story: From First Encounter to Research Puzzle

I remember writing this story, more than a year ago in September 2024, two weeks after we had officially moved into our house. I can relive the experience of writing it, where I was, what I had done the morning before asking my mom to be with our children so I can spend a bit of time to sit down and write. In a woosh—in the blink of an eye—I felt I was on my way back home. I stumbled upon a wonder, and over time, that wonder took shape as a research puzzle—my research puzzle—one that I could justify on multiple levels at once: personally, practically, and socially/theoretically (social action and policy).

I can still picture each room in that first few days/weeks after we moved into our house—it is easy—they looked all the same: half-inhabited boxes piled in corners and tools leaning against walls. I can still recall the scent: a mix of detergent, fresh paint, and a frozen Costco lasagna browning in the oven.

We had just moved back from Gatineau, Québec, to the South Shore of Montréal, still in Québec, closer to where both our families lived. We were already “close” to our families where we had been living for the past three and half years. It was just two and a half hours away by car, though, with children, the drive always stretched to more than three hours. Despite the proximity, it felt as if nothing truly tethered us there. I no longer felt the need to be on campus every day as I remember once enjoying doing, and I had not yet decided alongside whom I would journey through this doctoral work. My interests were scattered and varied; I wanted to touch everything, learn from everywhere, live alongside *every-being*.

The story was written the following afternoon after attending the information session at a school where, as it turns out, I would not send my children, nor conduct this research. Sam, my daughter, would not start school until September 2026, yet something compelled me to begin searching for a school for her—sooner than reason or convention might have advised. Narratively inquiring into this storied experience, as I rewrite, retell, and relive these stories—my narrative beginnings—I see that what I believed I was searching for my daughter that day may have also been what I was seeking for myself: as a mother, yes, but also as a narrative inquirer, trying to find the story I was already living and telling.

Site of Inquiry

There are almost 50 registered alternative public schools in Québec, all united under the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ, 2026). At their core, these

schools share a common purpose: to build and sustain a sense of community (Dostie, 2020; Chaubet et al., 2024). Within the RÉPAQ framework, teachers and parents are seen as partners, working together to nurture each student's autonomy and innate appetite for learning, particularly through project-based explorations. While the educational approaches differ from one school to the next—each carrying its own distinct personality and color—all embrace a philosophy in which students take responsibility for their own learning in environments that foster curiosity, independence, and a deep sense of ownership.

Parents⁴ usually play an integral role in each alternative school; they are asked to actively participate in the school's reflections, actions, and decisions. The terms *cogestion* and *coéducation*, as used by RÉPAQ, describe the forms of participation parents assume when enrolling their children in these schools. While English does not offer precise equivalents for these French terms, they can be approximately aligned with concepts such as co-management, co-production, and perhaps even co-gestation (*cogestion*), as well as co-learning (*coéducation*). Yet, even within RÉPAQ—where *cogestion* and *coéducation* are frequently invoked—their meanings, boundaries, and implications for practice remain neither clearly defined nor commonly shared. As a result, how these ideas are taken up, interpreted, and lived varies considerably across individuals and contexts. While I was writing my narrative beginnings and completing the literature review, I concurrently volunteered and worked as a substitute teacher in three alternative schools located near my home. Of these three sites, one school in particular stood out: *Mockingbird*⁵.

What distinguishes Mockingbird from other alternative public schools in Québec is not simply that parents are present in the school, but that they become woven into its everyday pedagogical life. Choosing Mockingbird entails a commitment to participate alongside children, teachers, and other families through ongoing educational responsibilities that extend across the school year. One of the principal ways this occurs is through *projects*. Rooted in children's interests and inquiries, projects are composed collaboratively by children, parents, teachers, and

⁴ I use the term parent intentionally to represent the unique role of an individual who holds responsibility—sole or shared—for providing acts of care (Pushor, 2011). The verb to parent refers to the actions carried out by individuals inhabiting this role. Many people parent: those in biological or non-biological relationships with a child or adolescent; grandparents and extended family members; individuals connected through kinship or close relational ties; workers in group homes, detention centres, or hospitals; and those who become significant figures in the lives of children and youth through fostering, adoption, or blended family constellations (see Pushor, 2011).

⁵ Pseudonyms are used throughout this narrative inquiry to protect the identities of the school and research participants.

members of the community. Rather than occupying the role of “instructor”, parents accompany children as co-educators, contributing their time, experiences, skills, and ways of knowing as projects unfold.

Parents' sustained presence fundamentally alters the pedagogical possibilities of the school. Their participation redistributes educational responsibilities across the community, creating conditions in which learning becomes a shared undertaking rather than the sole responsibility of classroom teachers. While teachers continue to hold responsibility for curricular planning and assessment, parents' ongoing participation makes possible different ways of organizing learning, relationships, and community life. That said, projects represent only one dimension of parental participation.

Parents also contribute through school committees, shared governance, and tripartite evaluation conversations alongside teachers and children. Families entering the community are paired through a *parrainage–marrainage* process, and all parents participate in collective gatherings “*journées conjointes*” designed to cultivate the relational, pedagogical, and philosophical commitments that sustain life within the school. While this brief description provides some context, it is not my intention to offer a procedural account of how parents are co-educators and co-managers at Mockingbird. Rather, as a narrative inquirer, I invite readers to come to know their presence and participations through the experiences of the parents who lived alongside them.

Personally Justifying the Research Puzzle

In narratively inquiring into the lived and storied experiences of parents at Mockingbird, I sought to learn how to see—and be with—their experiences as they were being lived. Rather than searching for conclusions, I came to dwell where our stories met: in the midst, in the *ish*, of our ordinary lives (Reynolds, 2004). It was there, in those everyday moments, that I began to notice my own stories shifting. They were interrupted, deepened, and re-composed alongside the stories parents entrusted to me. As we lived, listened, and inquired alongside one another, I found myself returning to questions that could never be answered once and for all. Which layers of my own stories—and of the stories participants chose to live and tell—might become visible? Which stories remained quiet, waiting for another time? How might our stories of becoming unfold within the relational spaces? And what might these stories teach us about learning to live well with one another?

In turning towards these questions, I found myself living, telling, reliving, and retelling my own stories as

a narrative inquirer,

a mother,

a partner,

a teacher, a learner, a student

a friend,

a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a niece, an auntie,

a visitor, a relative, a descendant,

or simply,

a human $\approx$ *being in relation*.

In doing so, this work makes visible a journey that is as much mine as it is theirs—as it is ours.

∞°∩

all my relations

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Chapter One: Socially and Theoretically Justifying the Research Puzzle

*Jonathan Livingston le Goéland aimait par-dessus tout voler.
 Cette façon d'envisager les choses—
 il ne devait pas tarder à s'en apercevoir
 à ses dépens—
 n'est pas la bonne pour être populaire parmi
 les autres oiseaux du clan.
 Ses parents eux-mêmes étaient consternés de voir Jonathan passer
 des journées entières,
 solitaire,
 à effectuer des centaines de planés à basse altitude,
 à expérimenter
 toujours.
 (Bach, 1970, p 11)*



Visual Field Text 3

Visual field text imagining stories of learning—
 experimentation, discovery, and the courage to fly
 towards lives lived *otherwise*.

Who Are These Schools For?

My first RÉPAQ's *journée conjointe* took place in a far end of the island of Montreal, in Ville St-Laurent. It was a Friday and at a school celebrating 50 years. Its name, drawn from a book by Richard Bach (1970), carries the spirit of a seagull who dares to fly beyond the ordinary, seeking freedom, purpose, and the endless possibilities of learning. The book whispers lessons of self-discovery, of pushing past limitations, of transformation through perseverance. Chiang, the Elder Gull, reminds us that wisdom can come from the most unexpected places, that learning is lifelong, that mentorship shapes us in ways unseen.

This story was the spark that ignited the school—a radical vision built on an idea both bold and simple:

Apprendre librement. Learn freely.

By 9:00 a.m., The RÉPAQ spokesperson, Pierre Chénier, steps forward, calling upon each of the 50 alternative schools across Québec. With each name spoken, a wave of applause rises, cascading through the gymnasium, where parents, teachers, administrators, and students from every corner of the province have gathered. The room fills with uneven, slightly delayed applause, as though people are listening carefully between each round of clapping, waiting to hear every school name before joining in again.

Following the reunion, the children of the school became our guides. Their excitement shimmered in their voices as they took us first to the library, where a small castle stood waiting, an invitation to step inside. Around it, a kitchen nestled between round tables, each adorned with colorful chairs.

"This is where we read, cook, and write," one child explains.

"Every week, some of us walk to the nearest store with the older ones to gather ingredients for our snacks. My friend loves cooking here—she's writing a recipe book for her project. She's seven years old."

The little girl, with her bunny hat and unruly curls continues on to describe her school day, the projects she is currently doing, as if it were the most natural and mundane thing in the world—unaware that, to many, myself included, her ordinary is nothing short of revolutionary.

Multiage classrooms stretch across the hallways, where five-year-olds and eleven-year-olds share the same space, the same air, the same discoveries. Here, there are no grade levels—no rigid steps, no invisible walls dividing one child from another. Art is everywhere—spilling onto walls, floors, even the ceiling—a quiet defiance of conventional schooling.

What strikes me most is the absence of a “front” to the classroom nor is there a teacher’s desk. Children have four *réunions* a day in their homeroom to discuss and reflect on their growth and learning. Outside from these reunions, children are responsible for their schedule. And every Friday, they sit with time itself, shaping the week ahead, taking ownership of what is to come.

Assessment is a conversation, between home and school—a reflection alongside the child, teacher, and parent.

No numbers,
no rankings,
no scales to measure and compare.

Only individual portraits—fluid and thoughtful—capturing learning in sentences alongside children. When you do think about this, it really is about the journey rather than a score. Something that is so novel to me.

This seamless thread between school and home is also particular—no division, no contradiction. In both spaces, the child remains whole, the same individual, nurtured in continuity.

“I want the same person in both worlds—what we work on at school, I know that parents are working on it at home too” a teacher explains in one of the workshops.

Learning is not confined to lessons; it is a way of *becoming*—into kindness, into responsibility, into the fullness of being human.

Seven years—this is the space and time they are given to meet the expectations of the Québec ministerial curriculum. Seven years to unfold their knowledge at their own rhythm, in their own way.

“We do not teach here. *On éduque ici*. The difference is everything,” another teacher adds, “I do not offer answers, I ask questions. That’s when I know I am doing my job right.”

And then, there are the parents—woven into the fabric of the school by offering workshops to children over the years. Each workshop is shaped by a parent’s passion, culture, language, or craft—whatever they wish to share. It begins with the parent, not their child. Parents are expected to give a minimum of four workshops throughout the year, teaching most likely not their children.

"My kids already know what I can do. These workshops are meant to enrich the lives of other children, giving them the chance to learn something their own parents might never teach them," a mother says to me.

The structure is intentional: a ratio of three children per parent, often doubled as parents work in teams.

“Last week, three parents brought a group, including my daughter, to the museum. One of the parents really loves museums so decided to organize this as a workshop,” she continues on to say.

What is learned in these workshops does not stay contained. It travels, carried back to these daily *réunions*, sparking new conversations with others, inspiring new ideas. A thread of curiosity unfurls for some children, perhaps even a project waiting to take shape, growing from one mind to many.

In the afternoon of *journée conjointe*, a parent shares her experience of being part of this alternative school. Her voice still carries both wonder and conviction in my ears as I write this story: "It's not just for the children. It's for the parents too. I am learning so much about myself—doing things I never imagined, not in a hundred years. Just standing here, speaking to all of you, sharing how I taught children to bead—it feels incredible. I am growing not only as a parent, but as a person. Plus, I understand

what connects my child to school, the kind of person we are learning to become, together. I am organizing events now. I have friends across the school. I am part of something bigger."

Are these schools built only for the privileged?

This continues to fulfil my wonders.

What about the single mother working full-time, who cannot slip away to lead a workshop, to sit in meetings, to contribute to the fabric of the school the way others can? Does her absence mean her child belongs-*less*? I keep returning to the same question:

Who are these schools truly for?

After asking a question to the school principal, I wrote her response in my research journal:

Our education plan is built on the idea that children have seven years to engage with the mandated curriculum. In that same time, parents have seven years to find their place—to step into their role, to engage in their children's education as expected of them.

Parents are expected to contribute a set number of hours, but their involvement extends beyond obligation.

This is a community,
not just a school—
a space where families share
a common purpose.

They meet, they listen, they ask:
How can we help?

Together, they are not just supporting the school;

they are learning how to be human,
how to find purpose in a world
that often feels fractured.

So, why are these schools marginal? I wonder.
No, I think to myself.

The other schools are.

(Melissa's Research Journal Entry, November 2024)

The story above was written before this study “officially” began, at a time when my understanding of these schools was only beginning to take shape. I was in the early stages of finding my place—first, as a parent whose eldest child was excited about entering the school system and second, as a narrative inquirer who lives within schools and imagines what could be *otherwise* (Greene, 1995). My curiosity guided me towards learning more about the educational spaces and the communities that sustain these alternative schools.

Not really knowing where to find an entry-point, I reached out—sending emails to different individuals I had found through the RÉPAQ website—hoping to see what possibilities might exist for conducting a doctoral research study in this community. At the time, it was really difficult to imagine, let alone design, a study situated within a context that I barely knew. What I did know was that something within these schools called to me, inviting a closer look, a slower way of coming to know.

Someone responsible for the parent committee at RÉPAQ replied to my email and kindly offered to meet with me to discuss what I had in mind. During our conversation, I learned that she had first entered this community as a parent in an alternative elementary school near her home. She had always imagined herself working in education, but it was through her daily life alongside her two children in that school that this calling became clearer. When her children eventually transitioned to high school, she described experiencing a sense of loss—her identity, so deeply tied to that community, no longer anchored in the same way.

As she recounted her story, she spoke of having been part of RÉPAQ for nearly thirty years, a commitment that had grown from her early involvement as a parent into a lifelong dedication. She told me, “I don’t see myself anywhere else” (Melissa’s Research Journal, October 2024). I sensed not only her devotion, but also the enduring connection many parents seem to hold with these alternative school communities.

We spoke for a long time. Through her stories and the generosity with which she responded to my questions, she extended an open invitation—welcoming me to attend any event, meeting, or gathering that I wished to experience. The story above was written after I participated in one of RÉPAQ’s *journées conjointes*, full-on days of collective gatherings held several times throughout the school year. Typically, the RÉPAQ administration collaborates with different schools to organize around five such gatherings annually.

Each gathering begins in a similar way: the spokesperson calls upon the schools one by one, from the oldest to the newest, inviting those who work or parent within these schools to stand as the others applaud. I remember sitting there, the first time I went to these events, observing this ritual, and thinking for a moment that it resembled something almost ceremonial, perhaps even cult-like in its energy. Later, I asked Pierre Chénier, president and spokesperson of RÉPAQ (2024), about the significance of this tradition. I jotted down what he told me in my research journal:

When you think about the first alternative school in Beloeil, a long time ago, and how it had to close because the government refused to fund it, you begin to see why this matters. Many members of this community have fought—and continue to fight—to show why these schools deserve to exist. I know it takes time, but it's important to acknowledge how much we've grown, how many of us see the importance of coming together, even from far away. Sometimes we have people from the North who travel down to spend the day with us, to continue sharing the same vision, the same philosophy. Did you notice how many parents we had the other day?

(Melissa's Research Journal Entry, November 2024)

I felt it important to place this story in this chapter because, after attending this event, and talking with Pierre, my research puzzle became clearer. My personal justification for undertaking this narrative inquiry was beginning to crystalize; however, it was time to better articulate its significance both theoretically and socially. Hence, I offer a synthesis of what other researchers and teachers have written in relation to this research puzzle.

The literature review begins with an exploration of the historical development of alternative schools in Québec, situating them within their broader educational and social contexts. This section also provides an overview of their current state, including their defining features and practices. Following this, I examine various forms of parental participation in schools, synthesizing key frameworks and practices as well as their documented effects on students, parents, and teachers. Finally, the review concludes by identifying critical gaps in the existing research and illustrating how my doctoral research sought to address them.

Historical Context of Alternative Schools in Québec

Long before the Quiet Revolution¹, the *Parent Report*, and the creation of the Ministry of Education, the city of Beloeil witnessed the establishment of *L'École Noël*, recognized as Québec's first alternative school (Picard, 2012). Founded by Colette Noël in 1955 along the

¹ The Quiet Revolution (French: Révolution tranquille) was a period of socio-political and socio-cultural transformation in French Canada, particularly in Québec, following the 1960 Québec general election.

shores of the Richelieu River, the school was inspired by the pedagogical methods of the renowned French educator and reformer, Célestin Freinet. Noël had encountered Freinet's work during a course in France, where Freinet's alternative educational approaches were developed through trial and error in a small school in the 1930s. These methods were grounded in student-centered learning and active community involvement (Marchand, 2006). For more than a decade, Noël single-handedly ran the school, which became a training ground for numerous teachers who later contributed to the expansion of alternative education across the province of Québec. Some of these teachers went on to work in public schools or other alternative schools that continue to operate today, serving as models for subsequent educational reforms (Marchand, 2006). Noël had made several attempts to integrate her school into the public system, but after facing repeated rejection, she decided to close *École Noël* in 1968 (Marchand, 2006).

Parallel to the closing of *École Noël* and the onset of educational reform in Québec, a public school in Outremont embarked on a new educational initiative inspired by the pedagogical movements of the time, including Freinet's methods and learning by and from student projects. This initiative led to the creation of *École Nouvelle-Querbes*, later known as *École alternative Nouvelle-Querbes* (2011) (Picard, 2012). In 1974, Denise Gaudet, a former teacher at *École Noël*, and Charles Caouette, a professor of psychology at the Université de Montréal, developed a research project titled *Experimentation d'un nouveau modèle éducatif visant à assurer le développement intégral d'enfants de niveau élémentaire* (Experimentation of a new educational model to ensure the integral development of elementary school children). The objective of the project was to transform a typical public school into an educational community—one that prioritizes meeting the individual needs of children with the help of both teachers and parents. This vision also aimed to foster a physical and social environment where children could live their lives as children, without undue pressure (Caouette, 1978). The project was presented to the authorities of the Sainte-Croix school board and the Québec Ministry of Education, and in September 1974, another alternative school was built: *École alternative Jonathan*. This school is located on the island of Montreal and celebrated their 50th anniversary in May 2025.

By the late 1970s, the demand for alternative education in Québec was on the rise, mirroring similar trends in the United States. In 1978, a directory listed 1,300 "public alternative schools," reflecting a broader movement away from current schooling models (Picard, 2012). Among the most well-known alternative pedagogies is the Montessori approach, developed by

Maria Montessori, who established her first “alternative” school in 1907 (Zeineddine, 2014). Additionally, Alexander Sutherland Neill founded Summerhill in 1921, while Célestin Freinet introduced his free-education approach in 1934 (Pallascio & Beaudry, 2000; Zeineddine, 2014). These schools embody a larger social movement challenging the norms of current educational institutions.

In the United States, the characteristics of alternative schools vary widely across states and districts; however, they share a common purpose: supporting students who, for various reasons, struggle to succeed in conventional schooling environments (Kim, 2005; Brown & Beckett, 2007). As Conley (2002) explained, these schools “offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting” (p. 245). Across Canada, similar school models exist. In British Columbia, for example, alternative education programs are specifically designed for “students considered at ‘high-risk’ for educational disengagement” (Peled & Smith, 2010, p. 56). Unlike the United States and several other Canadian provinces—where alternative schools developed primarily to serve ‘at-risk’ or ‘high-risk’ youth—the evolution of “alternative” education in Québec followed a distinctly different path (Fortems et al., 2023). In Québec, these schools emerged largely through parent-led initiatives driven by dissatisfaction with the current schooling and wanting to be part of, in different ways, their children’s school experience (Picard, 2012). Beginning as a grassroots movement culminated in the creation of the *Groupe œuvrant pour une école libéralisante, alternative, novatrice et démocratique (G.O.E.L.A.N.D.)* in 1981, the first provincial association dedicated to alternative education. Its mission was to bring together educators, parents, and administrators committed to reimagining what education *could* be.

By 2006, G.O.É.L.A.N.D. had evolved into the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ), broadening its mandate to include collaboration with parents in the creation of alternative schools, fostering communication between schools, supporting professional development, and advocating for alternative education across the province (Arseneault, 2017).

Current Situation of Alternative Schools in Québec

By the end of 2025, RÉPAQ had grown into a network of 48 alternative schools across 24 school boards in Québec, serving a collective student population exceeding 8,100 (RÉPAQ, 2025). The vast majority of alternative schools today remain the result of parent-led initiatives,

supported by RÉPAQ (Brabant et al., 2023). While they are all publicly funded and respect the Québec Ministry of Education curriculum, their educational philosophy differs from regular public schools. These schools focus on a dynamic educational environment that advocates a participatory, community-based, and humanistic approach in which all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents) play an active role in the student's development (Poulin, 2010).

The following guidelines must be met for a school to fall under the responsibility of RÉPAQ:

1. A more flexible school curriculum: 7 years at primary level (including kindergarten), 5 years at secondary level, but without distinction of level, to respect the learning pace of each pupil (concept of multi-age classrooms).
2. Continuous student assessment, based on a qualitative, tripartite approach (involving teacher, parent and student).
3. The adoption of a pedagogical program focused on the realization of the student's personal project. This approach optimizes the child's overall development (concept of open education and free education).
4. The formation of multi-age groups in which children develop their identity and skills through sharing and cooperation.
5. Enhancing the role of parents as “co-educators” and “co-managers/producers” of the school, with a view to reinforcing and concretizing the values of the alternative school.
6. Assigning a major role to the teacher-facilitator, who, through his or her involvement in the school-team, ensures the cohesion and coherence of interventions with students.
7. Active involvement of students in school decision-making and social life, fostering a sense of responsible, critical, and engaged citizenship. (RÉPAQ, 2025, as translated by Daoust)

Alternative schools emphasize meaningful parental engagement in their child’s education.

Enrollment is a voluntary choice, marking the first step in active collaboration between families and schools. Parents must adhere to the educational project of RÉPAQ and are expected not only to support the school’s vision but also uphold their commitment by participating in classroom activities throughout the year (Picard, 2012).

As previously discussed, two terms commonly used in schools and within RÉPAQ are *coéducation* and *cogestion*. According to *condition 6* of RÉPAQ's 17 foundational conditions², “*des parents coéducateurs*”, parents are recognized as integral members of the educational team. This perspective emphasizes their active involvement in daily school life, their children's education, and pedagogical reflections. For instance, *condition 4* asks parents to be involved in the assessment process. These assessments are described as tripartite, involving students, parents, and teachers collaboratively. In addition, *condition 16*, titled “*une école en cogestion*,” describes the school's organization as a shared responsibility among parents, school staff, students, and the larger community. This collaborative model aims to ensure the school's success and the achievement of its educational project's goals. For instance, under *condition 13*, RÉPAQ specifies that parents should play an active role in selecting the principal and teaching staff. Similarly, *condition 15* emphasizes parents' engagement in the school community, encouraging their participation in assemblies, committees, and governance processes. Almost ten out of the seventeen conditions allude to parents in some way: parents are not seen as passive stakeholders. They are understood as active collaborators whose participation is intended to contribute meaningfully to the collective success of the school.

Furthermore, parents have frequently taken a stand to defend the philosophy of alternative schools. For instance, in 2007, a group of parents mobilized to challenge the Ministry of Education and school boards over a proposed regulation requiring all schools in Québec to adopt percentage-based report cards with group averages (Brabant et al., 2023; Arseneault, 2017). These parents advocated for qualitative assessment methods that aligned with their educational philosophy. In 2025, the community of three schools came together to defend another position around the frequency of report cards, defending a common vision that there should be less, in general (in conversation with a teacher at one of these schools, November 2025). Such resistance from the Ministry of Education and from school boards has also been repeatedly identified as a persistent obstacle for parents seeking to establish alternative schools within their local communities (RÉPAQ, 2025; Brabant et al., 2023; Farmer, 2021; Arseneault, 2017). Drawing on interviews with ten founding parents, Arseneault (2017) showed that the pursuit of these initiatives is highly demanding, largely because alternative schools operate in the

² This document is currently being updating by a group of parents, teachers, administrators, students, and researchers (December, 2025).

absence of a specific legal framework or clearly defined administrative procedures and thus fall outside conventional school governance structures.

Although RÉPAQ and its associated schools emphasized parents as foundational to school governance and the broader educational project, there remains relatively little research attending to how parents actually experience this engagement, what participation looks like in everyday school life, and how these experiences shape relationships among children, parents, teachers, and school communities. This gap is not unique to Québec but reflects broader international concerns regarding parent engagement in schools (Anthony-Newman, 2024; Honingh et al., 2018). In their systematic review, Honingh et al. (2020) noted that parents' contributions and voices often remain fragmented or only partially understood within educational research. Similarly, Pushor and Amendt (2018), reflecting on more than five decades of scholarship on parent engagement, observed that despite extensive research demonstrating the importance of parent involvement for children's learning and school life, engagement in schools often continues through what they described as "random acts of parent engagement" (p. 202). Such scholarship raises important questions about how parents are imagined within educational spaces, the conditions that shape their participation, and what becomes possible when parents are understood not as peripheral supporters of schooling, but as relational collaborators in children's education. In the following section, I examine the diverse ways parents contribute to educational settings and consider how these contributions shape parent–teacher relationships.

Conceptual Pause: Defining Key Terms

Throughout the literature, the terms involvement, engagement, partnership, and participation are often used interchangeably. However, each reflects a different understanding of the relationship between families and schools. *Involvement* (Latin *involvere*, "to wrap into") has traditionally referred to school-defined activities in which parents support the work of the school (Epstein, 1995, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). The initiative largely remains with the school. *Engagement* (French *engager*, "to pledge oneself") emerged as a critique of involvement, emphasizing reciprocal relationships, family knowledge, and shared learning between schools and families (Pushor, 2013; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Ishimaru, 2019). *Partnership* (from Latin *partitio*, "to share") further emphasizes mutual responsibility and collaborative decision-making between educators and families. Finally, *participation* (Latin *participare*, from *pars* [part] and *capere* [to take]) literally means "to take part." More broadly, participation refers to taking part in

the life of a community, encompassing action, responsibility, belonging, and moments of uncertainty, negotiation, and disagreement.³

Types of Parental Contributions

Educational scholars have conceptualized school–parent relationships in multiple and evolving ways, reflecting differing understandings of parents’ roles in children’s schooling. Amongst the few scholars who write about this, Epstein (1995) developed an influential framework that conceptualizes parental involvement through a six-part typology, widely used in educational research and practice. The model delineates distinct yet interconnected forms of family-school-community involvement:

1. Parenting: supporting families in establishing home environments that nurture children’s learning and development;
2. Communicating: facilitating effective, two-way communication between schools and families about programs, expectations, and student progress;
3. Volunteering: encouraging parents’ participation in school activities and events
4. Learning at home: engaging parents in learning activities with their children at home, including initiatives by teachers, parents, and students;
5. Decision-making: involving parents in school governance and decision-making processes through advisory councils, advocacy groups, and similar structures; and
6. Collaborative with the community: organizations to support student learning and well-being.

³ This footnote was added after the doctoral oral defence (July, 2026): The parents at Mockingbird were not simply supporting school-defined initiatives, nor was my inquiry limited to their engagement in their children’s learning. Rather, they participated in the ongoing life of the school community through weekly projects, committee work, collective governance, evaluation conversations, and the everyday relationships that shaped school life. Parental participation therefore best captures the lived, relational, and evolving experiences that became visible through narrative inquiry. I also intentionally retain the adjective parental throughout the dissertation. My intention is to situate this work within the established educational literature on parental involvement, parental engagement, and parental participation, where these concepts have become recognized theoretical constructs. My inquiry is not primarily concerned with defining who parents are, but with understanding parental participation as a lived educational and relational phenomenon. Similarly, I distinguish parental from familial. I use parental when referring specifically to the experiences, roles, and participation of parents within the school community. I reserve familial for the broader network of family relationships and contexts in which children’s lives unfold. Although schooling is always situated within family life, this dissertation specifically examines parental participation as it is lived and experienced within an alternative public school community. As I wrote in one of my research journals during fieldwork: "Parental: the practice, the phenomenon—not the definition of the people." Just beneath it, I had written one additional word: "Community." Those two notes have stayed with me throughout this dissertation. They continue to remind me that this inquiry is less about defining parents than about understanding how parental participation is lived in relation with others within a school community.

This model is based on an understanding that the sphere of family, school, and community overlap and are influenced by the history, developmental patterns, and changing experiences of the individuals and institutions within each sphere. Epstein's framework has significantly influenced subsequent conceptualizations of family–school relationships and parental participation.

For instance, Honingh et al. (2018) identified four broad categories of parental involvement: participation in school activities and events, home-based support for children's learning, direct collaboration between parents and teachers, and initiatives designed to support parents themselves in assisting their children's education. These categories illustrate the varied ways parental participation has been conceptualized across educational contexts, ranging from school-centered involvement to more collaborative forms of engagement. Elsewhere, Honingh et al. (2018) conceptualized active parental participation in children's schooling as *co-production* (see Osborne & Strokosh, 2013), referring to forms of collaboration that require direct contributions from parents in shaping educational processes alongside school professionals (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). Unlike forms of involvement occurring primarily within the home, co-production emphasizes parents' participation in activities that directly influence the educational services provided by schools, such as collaboratively defining learning goals and activities with teachers (Honingh et al., 2020). At the same time, scholars have cautioned that such models may continue to privilege institutional priorities and reproduce top-down relational dynamics despite their collaborative intentions (Hong, 2019; Ishimaru, 2020).

Ishimaru (2020) has been influential in advocating for a shift “beyond the bake sale,” moving away from models of parent involvement toward parental engagement approaches. These approaches extended beyond parents to embrace the cultural practices and priorities of diverse communities, positioning parents and families as critical actors in student academic success and curriculum-making. The funds of knowledge framework, introduced by Moll et al. (1992), offers an approach that values the cultural and historical knowledge embedded within families and communities. Unlike Epstein's model, which often positions parents as passive participants, the funds of knowledge framework emphasizes that all families have rich cultural resources that can be used to enhance learning.

This framework emerged from research conducted with Latino families in Arizona, where educators worked with parents to understand their household knowledge to incorporate it

into the classroom (Moll et al., 1992; Moll & González, 1997). The goal of this work was to move beyond deficit-oriented understandings of families towards more democratic forms of partnership grounded in the knowledge and lived experiences present within households and communities. According to González et al. (2005), these democratic partnering were built from the concept of funds of knowledge which focuses on practices rather than culture—it examines what families do and how the family members articulate what they do. The daily activities of families are viewed as “a manifestation of particular historically accumulated funds of knowledge that households possess” (González et al., 2005, p. 41). Gonzalez et al. (2005) showed that when teachers acknowledged and used the cultural knowledge that students brought from home, it led to improved student engagement and academic outcomes. Rios-Aguilar et al. (2011) expanded this research by exploring how the framework could help address educational disparities in Latinx communities, suggesting that schools should recognize and integrate the skills and knowledge that families have acquired through their lived experiences.

In addition, Boutte and Johnson (2021) explored different models where teachers come to view their relationship-building with families simply as part of their efforts to build genuine interests in students’ lives (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017) and understand parents as partners and meaningful decision-makers in schools (Bang et al., 2018). Alasuutari (2010) and Råde (2020) used the image of a horizontal framework within parental partnerships to describe the relationships of parallel expertise and proximity between teachers or other professionals and parents. In this framework, the relationship is symmetrical, and professionals and parents act like partners and work together in collaboration. These partnership models have been highly valued in many Western countries such as Aotearoa (New Zealand). Inspired by Māori ways of knowing, within the national curriculum: *Te Whāriki*, “partnership” (*haere kōtuiti*) is mentioned as one of the four foundational principles: Family and Community – *Whānau Tangata*. This principle recognizes that families and communities are integral to curriculum making and children’s learning journeys. As such, parents are invited to participate in school decision-making, children’s assessments, and curriculum design. Yet, questions remain regarding how such partnership ideals are enacted within publicly funded educational systems and how these relational commitments are experienced within everyday school practices.

Pushor, a researcher and teacher educator in Saskatchewan, Canada, similarly addressed the absence of purposeful and sustained parent engagement in schools through her development

of a *curriculum of parents*, a conception that broadens understandings of curriculum and repositions parents' roles within the wider context of children's lives. Pushor (2013) envisioned a curriculum of parents as one in which "the lives of the teacher, children, and the significant people in the child's life all are central in, and inform, the teaching and learning" (p. 10). Such thinking resonates with Chan and Ritchie's (2016) understanding of parent-teacher partnerships as grounded in trust, respect, reciprocal communication, shared decision-making, and collaboration, rather than relationships in which parents are merely advised on how to raise their children or expected to conform to teachers' expectations. Extending these relational understandings beyond schools alone, Gil and Johnson (2021) demonstrated how community-based organizations might offer frameworks that position families not as peripheral participants but as co-constructors of educational and community spaces. Within these models, young people and families are understood together as central to shaping the learning, action, and vision of schools and communities. In these forms of equitable collaboration, families and educators work alongside one another in shaping school transformation through the lived knowledge families hold of children, communities, and educational life (Ishimaru, 2019).

Evidence of Parental Contributions on School Activities

Research has consistently identified relationships between school-initiated parental involvement initiatives and children's academic learning (Crosnoe et al., 2016; Jakobsen & Andersen, 2013). At the same time, children's educational experiences are shaped by multiple interwoven influences, including school experiences, family relationships, individual dispositions, and broader cultural contexts (Hedegaard & Fler, 2013). For instance, parental expectations can significantly impact children's perceptions of themselves as learners, fostering positive outcomes when paired with encouragement and motivation (Grant & Ray, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Urdan & Turner, 2005). Clinton and Hattie (2013) argued that high parental aspirations are a key driver of educational attainment but caution that these must be balanced with active support to be effective.

In a meta-analysis study, Jeynes (2012) examined the relationship between parental involvement and student success, using a weighted procedure to calculate average effect sizes across all comparisons. The findings revealed that home involvement programmes, particularly those focused on parents reading together with their children, yielded the highest positive outcomes. Additionally, programmes that emphasized partnership and facilitated collaboration

between parents and teachers as equal partners emerged as the category with the second-largest effect size. Notably, from the limited research that positions parents as partners in education, schools became culturally sustaining and joyous for students (Ishimaru, 2019). Trusting relationships were built over time by sharing experiences, asking questions of one another, listening to one another's experiences, and working toward common goals that benefit the school, the parents, and the students (McTavish, 2012). When educators meaningfully engage with parents and families, they are more likely to recognize, respect, and incorporate elements from the homes and communities of students. Schools become more affirming and "identity safe" (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013, p. 4). Yet relatively little research has attended to parents and teachers working alongside one another as equal contributors within educational spaces (Pushor, 2015).

While much of the literature focuses on the benefits of parental engagement for schools and children, a smaller body of research has examined how parents themselves may also benefit from engagement initiatives. Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) found that parents who participated in leadership-focused activities within schools developed valuable social and intellectual capital, enabling them to influence educational environments positively. In a 12-week engagement program for Hispanic parents, participants not only enhanced their leadership skills but also went on to establish advocacy organizations to support schools and shape educational policies (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). Beyond advocacy, parental engagement has been shown to improve parenting practices, sibling interactions, and community involvement (Pushor & Amendt, 2018; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Harris & Goodall, 2008). According to Harris and Goodall (2008), parents become more aware of school policies and expectations, allowing them to reinforce these standards at home while connecting with other families to foster a sense of community. These connections are especially valuable when parents contribute to decisions affecting the school or broader community.

Despite the importance of building meaningful partnerships between families and teachers, research on parental engagement is still relatively school-centered (Hong, 2019). In most schools, parental engagement continues to be operationalized as parent attendance at prescribed school events (such as open houses or parent-teacher associations) and "training" parents to ensure their children do their homework, attend school, behave in accordance with school expectations, and otherwise passively adhere to whatever policymakers and educational

professionals say is best for their children (Ishimaru, 2020; 2022). As parents support schools in this activity-based, individualistic manner, they rarely find opportunities to connect meaningfully with school staff or fellow parents, reinforcing the distinct boundaries between schools and families.

These institutionalized understandings of parental engagement also risk obscuring the complexities of families' everyday lives and the many forms of learning occurring beyond school walls. Expectations surrounding involvement often presume that parents possess the time, flexibility, financial stability, and familiarity with schooling practices necessary to participate in institutionally valued ways. Pushor (2023), reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic, noted that public conversations surrounding "learning loss" frequently overlooked the reality that children continued "to live and learn in the spaces and places that comprised the other 80% of their lives" (p. 23), even as schooling shifted away from physical classrooms. The pandemic further exposed tensions surrounding parental labour, care work, educational responsibility, and unequal access to time and resources across families and communities. Such tensions suggest the importance of attending not only to whether parents participate in schools, but also to how participation itself is imagined, structured, and valued within educational spaces.

Relatively little attention has been given to the inclusiveness of teacher-parent partnerships as equal contributors, a principle central to alternative school contexts in Québec. Honig (2004) calls for research to examine "how such partnerships develop, accumulate experience, evolve, and change" (p. 67) in broader school contexts. Consequently, there remains a need to attend to how alternative schools develop and sustain parent-teacher partnerships and how such relational commitments are lived, negotiated, and experienced within everyday school life.

Complexities of Parental Engagement

Negative outcomes of parental engagement have also been noted. Bevan (2020) highlighted the drawbacks of overly disciplinary approaches to engagement, which focus on monitoring rather than supporting children's learning. This tension is particularly relevant within alternative schools in Québec, where parents are expected to actively participate in school life and their children's education. While such participation is often grounded in relational and community-oriented intentions, mandated involvement may also risk becoming experienced as obligation or performance rather than as meaningful relational engagement. Under such

conditions, participation may reproduce tensions for families navigating differing capacities, responsibilities, time constraints, and relationships to schooling.

Hong and Ho (2005) found that students who perceive their parents as excessively monitoring their progress may experience diminished educational aspirations. Picard (2012) and Epstein (1995) emphasized the importance for parents to give space to children to take initiatives and make independent decisions. Such principles are foundational within alternative education models in Québec. Yet, when overly protective or perpetually involved, parents may hinder their children's capacity for autonomy, critical thinking, and independent learning (Schiffrin & Liss, 2017). Such tensions call attention to the complexity of relational engagement and raise questions regarding how schools might foster forms of participation that support both children's educational experiences and their growing autonomy.

Hattie (2012) attributed some failures in parental engagement efforts to parents' struggles with understanding the "language of learning" (p. 165), suggesting that the primary barrier is not parental attitude but a lack of accessible education for parents in the areas in which they are expected to support. As parents are invited to step into a classroom, to engage within the school landscape, feelings of insecurity and apprehension often arise (Hornby, 2011). These feelings may be particularly heightened within alternative school contexts, which often challenge familiar understandings of schooling, authority, and participation.

Finally, depending on families' socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, parents may possess differing opportunities, resources, and capacities to engage within schools (Daniel, 2015; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Picard (2012) emphasized the importance of schools providing supports that enable parents to participate meaningfully within school communities. These considerations raise important questions regarding how parents initially experience entry into alternative school contexts and how such experiences shift over time. I find myself wondering about parents' first impressions upon entering the school landscape and the extent to which these experiences may mirror those of their children, particularly during the uncertainties of the first days of school. Such questions also call attention to the ways parents' own memories of schooling may shape their perceptions of, and adjustments to, educational spaces that challenge more conventional understandings of authority, responsibility, and participation. My study seeks, in part, to attend to these questions alongside parents' lived experiences within alternative school communities.

The Relationship Between Teachers and Parents

Examining the evolving role of parents in schools reveals that policies worldwide increasingly promote parental engagement in education and participation in school councils (Anthony-Newman, 2024). In Québec, the desire to encourage parental participation in schools has been progressively expanded since the push for democratization in the school system outlined in the *Parent Report* from the Royal Commission on Education (1963-1964) (Arseneault, 2017). The Commission explained that although by 1961 parents could vote in the elections of school commissioners, parental involvement was generally voluntary, and parent organizations were considered weak. In 1971, school committees and parent committees became mandatory with the *Education Act of Québec*. Until Bill 40 (2020), the delegation of parent representatives to the boards of school commissions held majority—currently, parents are allocated only one-third of board seats (Lemieux & Bernatchez, 2022).

In addition, family engagement policies in Québec have been embedded in different documents, including the *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers* (2021) (Anthony-Newman, 2024). For example, *professional competency 10*, which states that teachers are to “co-operate with the family and education partners in the community” is explicitly dedicated to parental engagement (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 70). According to the Ministry of Education (2021), this competency is for teachers to “promote and encourage parental involvement in their children’s learning and school life and contribute to sustainable partnerships between the school and its community” (p. 70). The focus of this competency is on communication with families and teachers providing “family with the appropriate means to participate in their children’s learning as well as in school and extracurricular activities” (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 70). Throughout the rest of the document parents and families are also heavily mentioned in a nuanced way with an emphasis on social and cultural diversity and inclusion of all families in schools:

The nature of the family and the educational role played by parents can also vary from one culture to another. For example, in Indigenous communities, it is customary for many people, including Elders, community members and the extended family, to contribute to a child’s education. (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 15)

Theoretically, this government policy statement proposes an environment that is more open to parent-teacher partnerships.

In practice, however, this openness to parent-teacher partnerships does not always materialize as intended (Larivée, 2011). According to Hong (2011), some schools and families are worlds apart—sometimes distant and estranged, often conflicting and adversarial. Henderson et al. (2007) contended that teachers and parents have many beliefs, attitudes, and fears about each other that hinder their coming together to promote children's education. Although both entities are engaged in the complementary tasks of educating and nurturing children, they commonly find themselves in conflict. Parents and teachers approach children in different ways. While teachers may approach children with a sense of formality and a focus on intellectual development, as Hong (2011) highlighted, parents may view children in more holistic and personal ways. These differing outlooks set parents and teachers on separate paths. Harris and Goodall (2008) observed that parents tend to view their engagement as supporting their children, while teachers see parent engagement as a means to improve school behavior and gain support for school policies. Honingh et al. (2018) and Baeck (2010) have also described how some teachers regard parent partnerships as a threat to their position and attempt to distance themselves from parents through the insistence on professionalism. In much of the literature, there is an explicit call for more support for teachers on how to better engage with parents and to achieve a more balanced partnership (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Evans, 2018; Mutton et al., 2018; Patte, 2011).

As Hargreaves (2000) highlighted a long time ago, “few teachers are trained how to interact and work effectively with parents, or even with adults in general. They are unprepared to work with the conflicts, crises and general emotional turmoil that parent communication and criticism throw at them” (p. 151). Saltmarsh et al. (2015) explained that this challenge persists today, with pre-service teachers frequently lacking preparation in parental engagement and school partnership. According to Caspe and Hernandez (2021), only 51% of teacher education programs in America provide at least one course on parent and family engagement, and these courses are not mandatory. In a 2024 interview with *edweek*, Harvard Professor Karen Mapp noted that the number of university teacher preparation programs incorporating family engagement training has remained stagnant over the past two decades. As Mapp (2024) explained, “We have trained people to think that this is an add-on, or we have not trained them at all. [...] If we don’t train them, then of course they’re going to think this is something that’s not important” (p. 1). Without content knowledge focused on family school relationships in teacher

education, pre-service teachers must rely on what they already know, which is likely to mirror their own experience (Graue & Brown, 2004).

Research highlights the importance of providing pre-service teachers with the preparation to engage families in their future teaching practices. However, limited focus has been placed on how to engage discussions around parent-teacher partnerships in teacher preparation programs (Anthony-Newman, 2024; Ferrara, 2009).

Summary of Personal, Practical, Social, and Theoretical Justifications

This research emerged from a recognition of a persistent gap across schools, teacher education, and educational scholarship: the very limited and limiting ways in which parents are to be imagined and engaged—as partners, as collaborators, as allies in the education of their children and community. In this doctoral dissertation, I sought to address this gap by narratively inquiring into the experiences of parents whose lives and relationships are often positioned within, or constrained by, these narrow imaginaries.

Beyond contributing to scholarship on family–school–community partnerships, this study responds to an urgent pedagogical question: how might educators learn to think, live, and work alongside parents within educational spaces? Throughout my own teacher education, parents were largely absent from the curriculum. Rarely were we invited to imagine parents as co-participants in curriculum making or to consider how their stories, hopes, experiences, and everyday knowledges shape what is lived within school communities. Parents appeared, if at all, at the margins of professional preparation.

Finally, as a parent of two beautiful children—one soon to enter the world of schooling—I find myself returning to what Greene (1995) described as the call to imagine what could be *otherwise*. As I inquired alongside parents, I continuously imagined a future in which the teachers my own children encounter have been invited to learn alongside parents' stories—stories whispered in hallways, echoed in classrooms, and carried across schoolyards. This study offers not only insight into how such relationships are lived and negotiated, but also gestures toward possibilities for imagining more relational, participatory, and humanizing pedagogies within schools and beyond.

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While my love for narrative inquiry and its attentiveness to experience initially made this an intuitive choice, the decision became increasingly explicit as I spent time reading the literature on parental engagement and, more specifically, on how parents have been positioned—or not—within school landscapes. Across the literature, what became strikingly visible was the profound absence of parents’ voices (Pushor, 2020). Pushor (2007) noted that much of the research *on* parental engagement has been filtered through the perspectives of teachers and school administrators, with parents rarely invited to contribute their own stories as part of the broader conversation. As she wrote, “It tends to be research *on* parents, rather than research *with* parents” (p. 9, original emphasis). Although Pushor raised this concern almost two decades ago, this absence continues to be noted in contemporary scholarship (e.g., Hong, 2019; Ishimaru, 2020, 2022; Barce, 2024; Guo & Zhao, 2025; Wildmon et al., 2025).

Within much of this literature, the process of studying parents’ experience is often rendered straightforward: the researcher asks some predefined questions, participants respond, and the researcher transcribes, analyzes, and reports these accounts to an academic community (Sherwood & Nind, 2014). This process depicts a largely one-sided model of knowledge production.

I turn to the words of bell hooks (1990, p. 151) to illuminate why I chose to move *away* from this top-down approach:

*I want to know your story.
And then I will tell it back to you
in a new way.
Tell it back to you in such a way
that it has become mine,
my own.
Re-writing you,
I re-write myself anew.
I am still author, authority.
I am still the colonizer,
the speaking subject,
and you are now the centre of my talk.*

Narrative inquiry explicitly acknowledges power differentials in research and emphasizes the collaborative co-composition of experiential texts through ongoing negotiations alongside research participants (Caine et al., 2022; Dubnewick, 2024). It offers a way of inquiring into experience through story in sustained relational commitments between researchers and participants.



Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology created by Connelly and Clandinin in the 1990s. For these two educational researchers, narrative inquiry is both a way of understanding experiences as storied phenomena and a study of how people experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experience plays a central role in relation to the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of narrative inquiry. The Deweyan view of experience acknowledges "interaction" between the personal and the social nature of experience; "continuity" or the temporal unfolding of experience; and "situation" which attends to the specific contours of the places where experiences evolve. Dewey's criteria of experience provide the theoretical grounding for researching experience through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space including temporality, sociality, and place. To navigate the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, narrative inquirers move backward and forward, inward and outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry begins from the understanding that experience is lived and understood narratively. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded us, "[e]xperience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience" (p. 19). Stories do not merely represent experience; they carry it—shaping how we come to know ourselves, one another, and the worlds we inhabit. For Caine (2002), "the everyday stories of ordinary lives are so powerful and tell so much of who we are as individuals and as society" (p. 18). Stories move across time and place, and relationships, often bridging what is familiar and what is imagined—past, present, and future (Leen, 1995). Each story is therefore both imagined and situated, embedded within particular moments, places, and relational contexts, told and lived alongside others. It is within this relational and storied landscape that narrative inquirers come to inquire into, with, and alongside the experiences that shape their research puzzle.

Relationships in Narrative Inquiry

Ontologically, narrative inquiry understands experience as lived over time, across place, and in relation with others and the world (Caine et al., 2022). From this view of being, narrative inquirers commit to living alongside participants and co-composing stories within the midst of their ordinary life. This methodological stance reflects a pragmatist and relational epistemology¹ in which knowledge is understood as situated, provisional, and co-composed through lived experience. This epistemological position situates collaboration as integral to the research design and to how I conceptualize my role within the study. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, narrative inquiry is about “people in relation studying *with* people in relation” (p. 189; emphasis added). This relational commitment is what distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative methodologies or narrative research. Narrative inquiry emphasizes the deep involvement of the researcher within the study, not as a distant observer but as an active research participant. Researchers engage alongside participants, turning inward and onward to their own life experiences and weaving their perspectives and unique vantage points into the inquiry as it unfolds (Clandinin, 2023).

Caine et al. (2022) further illuminated the dense relational fabric of narrative inquiry, drawing attention to the ways lives are composed in relation to worlds, and within intersecting social (societal), cultural, institutional, linguistical, familial, historical, ecological narratives. Narrative inquirers attend to these layered relationalities within life stories, recognizing that such connections are not always consciously named; however, they remain profoundly influential in shaping experience. As Caine (2002) reminded us, “[e]ach story is embedded in context and without the context the words within the story become meaningless” (p. 13). By bringing social (societal), cultural, institutional, linguistical, familial, historical, ecological narratives to light, narrative inquiry provides a lens for exploring how personal storied experiences intertwine with collective stories—stories told and lived in relation, and towards a world that might yet be *otherwise* (Greene, 1995).

¹ Caine et al. (2022) caution against the reduction of narrative inquiry to neutral method, noting that what often replaces a “vision of activist philosophy is a vision of neutral method focused on analyzing the formal logical structure of language,” a move that McKenna and Pratt (2015) describe as standing in contrast to a tradition of resistance. As Caine et al. (2022) explain, the philosophical commitments that narrative inquirers allude to instead, carry “spirits of resisting the status quo, our sense of composing our lives in ways that called forth relationality, and moral commitment to equity and social justice” (pp. 8–9).

Transition to Field at an Alternative School in Québec

Four parents from different families, each with children attending the same alternative school in Québec, participated in this narrative inquiry. Parents were recruited from the school where I had been volunteering and, on occasion, serving as a substitute teacher since September–October 2024. Through my time at the school, I developed a strong rapport with the school principal, with whom I shared my intention to work alongside parents to explore their experiences within this specific alternative school. Her support and interest became pivotal in shaping the direction of my research. With her approval, I was granted access to participate in various school activities and to further imagine the study. Once I obtained University Research Ethics approval (Appendix A: S-03-25-11313-REG11313, March, 2025), I was formally introduced to the teaching staff during one of their Wednesday afternoon meetings. After presenting how I imagined coming alongside research participants, I introduced myself more formally to parents in one of their school’s weekly newsletters. The intention, beyond recruitment, was for all parents to be aware of who I was within the school and to understand why I was, at times, living alongside their children within research participants’ school projects.

The sample size was intentional and aligned with the relational commitments at the core of narrative inquiry, facilitating for the development of in-depth relationships with each research participant (Clandinin, 2023). From March 2025 to April 2026, I relationally lived alongside parents and their children during different moments of the school day. All participants signed a consent form at the beginning of our research conversations (Appendices B, C, D, E), ongoing consent was negotiated verbally at each meeting. I participated in school projects, joined committee meetings, and often shared lunches with parents and their children in the school cafeteria. In addition of living alongside them, I engaged in six to ten audio-recorded research conversations with each participant. Throughout these conversations and my ongoing presence at the school, I composed narrative accounts for each parent, which were subsequently shared, discussed, and negotiated with them.

Reflective Methodological Turning Point

In my original research proposal, I had also intended to explore how becoming a teacher within an alternative school context shapes teachers’ perceptions of teaching, learning, education, and community. I was wondering about the stories that lived and were being composed alongside parents in classrooms. By listening to these stories and inquiring into them,

I hoped to make teachers' stories visible. I also initially imagined informing, at a practical level, how teacher education programs might better support future educators and teacher educators in addressing broader questions of family and community engagement in schools. And while this remains an important issue, for my doctoral research I focused on the experiences of parents.

Transition from Field to Field Text

There are two ways of beginning this relational methodology. The first way of entering a narrative inquiry is by living the experience alongside research participants. The second is by listening to the telling of experiences, which is often the most common route of entry. That being said, when entering through telling, the methods most commonly used in narrative inquiry are conversations. In the telling, some narrative inquirers have written about using artifacts as beginning places to storying experience (Caine, 2007). Other methods used alongside conversation include written observational notes—attending to research participants' facial expressions, silences, interruptions, the background in which conversations took place, those who passed by, and the time of day.

In reading how Clandinin (2023) and others write about what field texts come to stand for in narrative inquiry, I understood that they function as more than records of experience; they work, in many ways, to confirm and extend the researcher's memory. What became a particular wonder for me was how these field texts were not simply produced by me but *co-composed in relation—between myself and the research participant*.²

For this narrative inquiry, living and telling occurred simultaneously. However, as I co-composed the narrative accounts, the primary field texts to which I returned repeatedly were the transcripts of the audio-recorded research conversations alongside parents. These conversations took place in French, were transcribed, and subsequently translated into English. Participants were invited, if they wished, to take photographs of important spaces in the school or to bring an artefact that held particular meaning to them into our conversations. Photographs and artefacts, as Rose (2016) discussed, can visually support the understanding of lived experiences for both research participants and researchers. When research participants chose to bring these visual tools in our conversations, they opened yet another way for me, as a researcher, to enter their

² Field texts are not neutral records of experience; they are interpretive and collaboratively constructed within the relational space of inquiry. In narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described these texts as co-composed, emphasizing that they are “created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience” (p. 92).

worlds—to listen differently, to linger, and to experience their storied lives beyond words alone. These moments invited me into the texture of their experiences and carried me forward into the work of retelling and reliving, where their stories—and mine—were recomposed in new ways of being in relation (Caine, 2002, 2007).

All the photos and artifacts shared remained with research participants. When particular visual artefacts were emphasized by a research participant or me for their place in a narrative account, I included a footnote explaining the rationale for their inclusion.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasized that relationships profoundly shape both the creation and interpretation of field texts, noting that “a relationship embeds meaning in the field texts and imposes form on the research text ultimately developed” (p. 94). The relational dynamics between researcher and research participants therefore influence the meanings, styles, and modes through which field texts are co-constructed, underscoring the need for sustained reflexivity throughout the inquiry process.

I maintained a reflexive journal for each research participant, as well as a journal across the duration of the study. I used this research journal during different occasions, including moments when I was asked to substitute for a teacher in the school. These journals held my emotional responses, analytical reflections, emerging questions, and moments of creative expression, including poetry, as I worked to stay close to the unfolding of experience. As Spradley (1980) argued, such reflexive practices constitute the personal dimension of fieldwork and illuminate the affective domain that inevitably shapes qualitative inquiry.

Reflexive and reflective notes extended beyond the school in which the narrative inquiry was situated. I also composed detailed field notes during my participation in public RÉPAQ events, where I engaged in activities that deepened my understanding of how participants’ lived experiences could be situated within a broader landscape. These encounters situated participants’ stories within the RÉPAQ’s network, offering a wider relational and institutional context for the storied experiences that follow.

Guided by Spradley’s (1980) and Baribeau’s (2005) methodological guidance on composing condensed accounts, these notes were written immediately following field experiences—often in my car—knowing that once I opened my front door, my attention would be drawn elsewhere. These field notes constituted important contextual layers to the narrative

accounts, enriching my understanding of the settings, relationships, and circumstances in which participants' stories unfolded.

Caine et al. (2022) explained that stories lived and told are continuously interpreted through the cyclical process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving.³ In this study, I employed multiple forms of field texts—such as audio-recorded conversations, reflective journals, and detailed field notes—to attend to this cyclical movement as it unfolded over time. I also remained flexible and open to the emergence of additional forms of field texts that developed organically through my relationships with research participants. In composing these field texts, I was attentive to the broader “social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 46) that intersected with and shaped both individual and collective stories.

Moving from Field Texts to Interim and Final Research Texts

As these field texts were collected, I began co-composing a narrative account for each parent. Narrative accounts are understood as “interpretive constructions of individual experiences attentive to the three-dimensional inquiry space” (Clandinin et al., 2014, p. 51). These interim research texts functioned as a bridge, linking one experience to another and illuminating the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities embedded in both research participants' and my own lived and told stories. In this sense, they were collaboratively negotiated documents that reflected the relational nature of narrative inquiry, shaped through ongoing conversations between researcher and research participant. Developing interim texts was a crucial methodological step, enabling me to dwell more deeply within storied moments, landscapes, and relational spaces. This process opened possibilities for new interpretations, insights, and directions to emerge, thereby enriching both the inquiry and the relationships at its core (Clandinin, 2023). Once these narrative accounts were co-composed with research participants and their resonance and accuracy confirmed, I moved toward composing the final research texts with the intended audience in mind.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that composing a final research text is a process marked by inherent tensions, requiring the researcher to turn inward toward the voices of research participants while simultaneously looking outward to the potential forms the text might

³ The terms of living, telling, retelling, and reliving have special meanings in narrative inquiry. First, people live stories and tell stories of the living. The process in which researchers inquire into these lived and told experiences is called retelling stories. While retelling stories of lived and told stories, researchers and participants might possibly be affected by them and start reliving their stories during or after a research period (Clandinin, 2023).

take and the audiences it may ultimately engage. Crafting the final text therefore involved identifying narrative forms that honoured the voices of both participants and me as the researcher, as well as the relational stories that emerged between us. Throughout this process, I remained attentive to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space and to the broader social, cultural, familial, linguistical, and institutional (historical) narratives that shaped and were shaped by the experiences of participants and my own positioning as a narrative inquirer. Such attentiveness enabled a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and interwoven nature of our storied lives (Clandinin, 2023). As I co-composed field texts and interim research texts, I continually reflected on how the final research text would take form. This included considering how it might be structured, represented, and interpreted not only by research participants, but also by potential public and scholarly audiences.

Narrative inquiry is not a methodology oriented toward producing definitive answers, isolating themes, confirming typologies, or generating abstract frameworks (Clandinin, 2023). Rather, this study attended to the movement of experience. Rooted in narrative inquiry, I sought to trace resonances, dissonances, and moments of complexity. Clandinin (2023) referred to this as resonating narrative threads that travel across and between narrative accounts. The intention of the final research texts, then, was not resolution but richness: to make visible the complexity of inquiring into people's lived experiences. Throughout this inquiry, I remained attentive to my initial research wonders, as well as to the personal, practical, and social/theoretical justifications shaping the work, while sustaining a steady orientation to the three-dimensional inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Narrative inquiry is, above all, a relational methodology—one in which ethical considerations are not supplementary but live at the core of the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While institutional requirements such as anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent remain necessary, narrative inquirers must attend to ethical matters that extend far beyond procedural guidelines. The first ethical responsibility is always to those who invite us into their lives. Negotiations of entry into the field, ongoing presence, the co-composition of texts, and eventual leave-taking are all moments where ethical commitments must be lived out rather than merely stated. Relational ethics, as Clandinin et al. (2018) articulated, guide narrative inquirers to understand ethical action as situated within—and inseparable from—the relationships shaped

over time with participants. These ethical commitments create spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants, spaces marked by openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care.

In this study, I sought to remain closely attuned to the shifting dynamics of my relationships with each parent. This required ongoing attention to their comfort, their boundaries, and the particular ethical needs that surfaced at different moments in our time together. Caring for the stories of both participants and myself meant honouring the ways our lives became intertwined in the composition of field texts, interim texts, and, ultimately, the final research text. Ethical responsibility, therefore, was not a stage of the research process but a way of being in relation—a continual attentiveness to how stories were lived, told, negotiated, and represented.

Ongoing negotiation between researcher and participant is a central ethical thread in narrative inquiry; it is through these negotiations that an ethical space is created—one in which both researcher and participant continually consider who they are in relation with one another (Clandinin, 2023). Before beginning this narrative inquiry alongside parents, I took time to share the purpose of the study, the anticipated rhythms of our conversations, and the possible risks and responsibilities associated with participation. These early negotiations were not a single moment but part of a continuing dialogue that unfolded as our relationships deepened. Throughout the inquiry, I returned again and again to the interim research texts, sharing drafts with each participant, revisiting storied moments, and negotiating how their lives were represented. These ongoing negotiations continued until participants felt that the narrative accounts resonated with their experiences and that the contexts in which their stories were situated were represented with care. This iterative process echoed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) insistence that representation is always relational and always partial, requiring constant attention to participants' sense of being seen, heard, and understood.

Finally, I was also attentive to the narrative threads that emerged across the many stories we lived and told together. To do so, I engaged closely with the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space—attending to temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This threefold frame offered a way to inquire into experiences as they unfolded in relation: across past, present, and imagined futures; within the personal and social conditions shaping our lives; and in the particular places of the school where our lives intersected. By remaining attentive to this three-dimensional space, I became more aware of the social, cultural, familial, and

institutional narratives that shaped participants' experiences—and my own. Such awareness was not simply analytic but ethical; it supported my efforts to walk alongside parents with respect, openness, and responsibility. It helped me to surface resonant narrative threads while honouring the uniqueness of each person's life and their place within this alternative school landscape and in this research study.

Relationships Alongside Response Communities

After writing about response communities in their book titled: *The Relational Ethics of Narrative Inquiry* (2018), Caine et al. (2021) returned to response communities in an effort to further articulate what they are and the possibilities they hold for narrative inquirers. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Men in Dark Times* (1968), they conceptualize response communities as “another place of learning” (p. 663): spaces where ethical, relational, and political complexities are lived with.

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) first described response communities as places of responsibility: “ongoing places where [narrative inquirers] can give accounts of their developing work over time. As the explaining [in the response community] takes place, clarification and shaping of purpose occurs” (p. 73). Their early conceptualization emphasized response communities as spaces where developing texts could be refined so as to reach broader public audiences. While this type of work remains important, Caine et al. (2021), thinking alongside this first iteration, emphasized that “our writing is, itself, a process of inquiry” (p. 662). From this standpoint, response communities are no longer understood primarily as mechanism for improving writing or research purposes, they act as relational spaces of inquiry.

Caine et al. (2021) conceptualized response communities as:

people who come alongside as trusted guides or inquiry *friends*. Response communities are composed of carefully selected people who meet regularly and create spaces where we can share developing inquiry ideas, frame possible studies, engage in considerations of *who* people are in our/their studies, consider issues around participants, and later read developing texts and show how texts are becoming relational texts that represent the experiences of researcher and participants. (p. 663; emphasis added)

Response communities can help narrative inquirers attend to how they shape both the experiences of research participants and the research puzzle they take up.

Caine et al. (2021) described response communities as spaces of friendship and as spaces of appearance. Drawing on Arendt, they wrote that such spaces:

allow us to see who we are in our “willingness to act and speak at all” (Arendt, 1958, p. 186) and to insert ourselves into the multiple worlds alongside participants and each other. This insertion allows us to retell and relive our stories of experience; *it is here that we reveal ourselves to ourselves and to each other—it is here that we also situate ourselves in the world.* (p. 664; emphasis added)

In this way, response communities support narrative inquirers in attending to the ongoing relational complexities that shape the study and inquiry—tensions Rosiek (2018) characterized as negotiations between personal experience and the broader macrosocial narratives that influence identity, subjectivity, and ethical sensibilities. Response communities offer spaces to inquire into the ways “the broader social forces bend our feelings, identities, and our sense of right and wrong” (p. 206). Attending to such complexity requires a commitment to what Rosiek (2018) names “a practice of quiet listening for ameliorative possibilities amidst the din of social forces at play in our lives” (p. 206). This practice invites narrative inquirers to remain responsive to both the intimate contours of lived experience and the wider social, political, educational, cultural, familial worlds in which those experiences take shape.

Throughout this doctoral research, I participated in the *Narrative Inquiry Research Issue Table*, a long-standing response community within narrative inquiry guiding me in living and inquiring alongside parents. This community consisted primarily of scholars engaged in narrative inquiry, many of whom were themselves working through relational, ethical, and interpretive questions in their own studies. This virtual space, where we met every three weeks, provided a place to bring forward developing narrative accounts and to dwell with unfolding relational moments, supporting my ongoing reflexivity about who I was—and was becoming—as a narrative inquirer. As a response community, this group also functioned methodologically, guiding my inquiry into my own narrative threads in relation with those of participants and ensuring that the interpretive, ethical, and relational dimensions of the research were held with sustained care (Caine et al., 2021).

I also participated in the *International Summer School of Narrative Inquiry: For Love of the World*. This weeklong summer institute was held in Bergen, Norway, from August 11–15, 2025. Throughout the week, we lived in relation: sharing meals at the same tables, sleeping

under the same roof, breathing the same air. We walked, and for some, ran along the same paths, swam in the same cold Norwegian sea waters, tasted the same ice cream. In these small, ordinary rhythms of living side by side, we grew closer—not only to one another, but to what it means to become, together, narrative inquirers. Throughout my time, I wrote continuously, attending to what emerged through place, pace, and proximity to others engaged in narrative inquiry. I wrote scenes, emotions, laughter, scent, hugs, and fragments of conversations—stories of people studying together, with people, in relation.

Following the summer school, a member of the *Narrative Inquiry Research Issue Table* and I found ourselves lingering in thought about relationships in narrative inquiry—about relational ethics, about the risks and responsibilities of being in relation, and about friendship in academia and beyond. Rather than turning immediately to theory⁴, Dr. Christie Schultz and I turned towards one another. We began writing letters, using correspondence as a vehicle thinking alongside and wondering how friendship might carry not only as a private bond, but as a practice that sustains ethical and scholarly life.

These letters unfolded alongside the work of a philosopher and political theorist whose words resonated deeply with me over the course of writing this dissertation—Hannah Arendt. Reading, thinking, and living alongside Arendt, friendship appeared not as intimacy or agreement; rather, it emerged as a space of plurality: a relation that holds distance, invites judgment, and makes it possible to appear to one another as unique thinkers in a shared and common world. Writing to and with one member of my response community offered a relational space to dwell with questions of proximity, responsibility, and relational ethics as I lived and inquired alongside parents.

What is to Come Next?

In the pages that follow, I write alongside parents' experiences in an alternative school, composing and re-composing the storied experiences that emerged from our time together—across places, moments, and relationships. Chapters Three to Six each hold a co-composed

⁴ As Dubnewick (2024) reminded us, narrative inquiry begins in experience, yet it is never atheoretical. Instead, it approaches theory from a somewhat upside-down approach—holding ideas lightly, turning them around, letting them bump up against lived experience. Caine et al. (2022) further explained that when experience is taken as the starting point, narrative inquirers travel outward towards different theories. In doing so, they compose a kind of *counterstory*—resisting the conventional practice of selecting a theory first and then using it as a lens to analyze experience (p. 230).

narrative account written alongside each parent who graciously accepted to be part of this narrative inquiry.

These co-composed narrative accounts are followed by two papers. Chapter Seven: Paper 1 offers a foundational account of storied life in this school—the stories of parents alongside children and others who cross its threshold, as they collectively and collaboratively learn to create, negotiate, and sustain a school community. Chapter Eight: Paper 2 thinks with Arendt’s notion of spaces of appearance, attending to how this community offers parents a terrain for appearing, speaking, and acting, together.

From there, I turn towards another wonder, one that continuously lingered throughout this narrative inquiry alongside parents and my ongoing ethical reflections: friendship. I wondered about friendship both in research, alongside research participants, and within the institution of schooling, a world I never fully stepped away from since I was toddler. As such, Chapter Nine: Paper 3 thinks with Arendt to narratively inquire into friendship alongside a research participant and parent at Mockingbird. Finally, Chapter Ten: So Long, For Now offers a concluding section and turns towards the personal, practical, social/theoretical (social action and policy) justifications of this research puzzle.

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Chapter Three: Annie's Narrative Account

the child sees the apple

if the teacher shows
one picture,
the child sees
one version.

but I see it
from another side—
I understand it this way:
a stem emerges,
a bruise darkens,
a worm appears.

and suddenly,
the child sees
the whole apple—
a full
360 degrees.

the parent
who does something else
entirely;
the parent
with a structured plan;
the parent
who's totally free;
the parent
who never once thinks
about competence.

maybe it's
less pedagogical.
it's still learning.

because life
is learning.

give a child reading,
tuck it gently
into your project—
it will come,
in its own time.
they will learn
to read.

that's how
I live it.

I'm structured.
I take what the teacher
offers
and I apply it.
that's part of what
I want to do.
and other parents
do something else
entirely.

I'm glad for that—
glad there is
so much
variety,
so many ways
of holding
the apple.

**the child sees
the whole apple.**

Found poetry has become one of the ways through which I, as a narrative inquirer, re-story the experiences Annie so generously shared with me. As Butler-Kisber (2002) reminds us, poetic forms in qualitative research can evoke emotional, layered understandings that conventional prose may struggle to hold. Working with found poetry invites me to stay close to Annie's own words—bending and shaping them only slightly—so that the hum of her voice, the sharpness of her thinking, and the depth of her commitments might become more visible. Found poetry helps me attend not only to *who* she is but also to *how* she lives—how she accompanies her daughters, how she enters the life of the school, how she carries her convictions into the everyday practices of mothering and learning alongside them in this alternative school setting.



Visual Field Text 5

The story above emerges from our very first conversation, a moment in which Annie offered an image that has stayed with me throughout this narrative inquiry: learning, she said, is a 360-degree process. She imagined it as an *apple*¹—intact, carrying small bumps and bruises, luminous, and many-sided. Each curve holds the trace of those who gather around the child: parent, teachers, caregivers, companions in passing. No single hand shaped it alone. Each being offers a different pressure, a different warmth, a different way of holding (and letting go). Annie’s metaphor gestures towards a vision of education as deeply communal: a collective endeavour where the fullness of learning becomes visible only when we acknowledge the plurality of those who participate in it.

September 29, 2025

I think it is important to begin with where I physically am as I reopen Annie’s narrative account after the summer break. I am sitting in a small, charming café in Montréal—one recommended by a colleague of my husband.

I came here because I needed to write somewhere other than the familiar corners of my house. It has been a long time since I last opened this document—too long, perhaps—and with a meeting scheduled with Annie after such a long pause, it felt important to return to it now. This is the very first narrative account I co-composed for this inquiry. Some narrative inquirers can weave several accounts simultaneously, holding multiple stories in the air at once. I honestly do not know how they manage that. Annie was the last participant to join the study, and yet it felt entirely natural that her account would be the first to be written. There was an ease in writing her stories, a kind of flow in attending to her experiences as a mother in this school.

Annie has a rare gift—she sees the world from unexpected angles and invites others, including me, to see differently too. The clarity and generosity of her language make complex ideas feel not only accessible but profoundly human. Writing

¹ The image of the apple is an artwork my son, Louis, created with his educator at daycare. I chose to include it not only because he was so proud—proud of learning to handle a glue stick, proud of arranging colours on his own—but because of what the image reveals. Each torn piece of paper, each fragment of colour, comes together to form the shape of an apple. No single piece makes sense on its own; it is their combined presence, their interplay, that allows the whole to become visible. In many ways, Louis’ art echoes the metaphor Annie offered: learning as a 360-degree process, something that only comes into view when we attend to all its sides, all its contributors. His artwork reminds me that knowledge—like this apple—is assembled through relationships, perspectives, and acts of creation. It is a small image, yet it holds within it the whole.

her account felt effortless; the retelling of her stories simply poured out of me.

Now, as I return to it—preparing for our conversation on Thursday—I find myself rereading with a sharper, more critical eye, almost dispirited by what I see. My first impulse is to rewrite everything, to dismantle each line as though undoing a thread that no longer belonged.

Perplexity comes to mind. Blix et al. (2024) described perplexity in narrative inquiry as a way of dwelling with confusion and uncertainty, welcoming it as an opening for thinking otherwise. Siegfried (2002) reminded us that for Addams, perplexity signals “a rupture with conventional attitudes, beliefs, and practices, something that cannot be resolved without developing a new understanding of the situation and calling into question received values” (p. xxii). If I follow Addams (1903) and Blix et al. (2024), then I must allow this perplexity to settle—to become a site of learning rather than something to be resolved too quickly.

Slowly, memory returns—of the moment I first wrote this narrative account. I remember it vividly, as if it were yesterday: a light breeze drifting through my open window after a long, grey winter—grey both physically and emotionally. The air smelled clean, like renewal. Outside, I could hear the soft hum of my favourite birds—the cardinals always the most lyrical. In that quietness, I sat in my home office, both screens glowing: the transcript open on one side, the untitled document on the other, my fingers moving between them as the story found its form.

Within that memory, a sense of steadiness returns—gentle but firm—reminding me that even amidst doubt, the act of writing carries its own kind of faith.

And so, instead of yet another retelling of Annie’s stories, I am choosing to add reflections—thoughts that surfaced as I reread the narrative account after an entire season has passed, and in anticipation of meeting Annie again this week to share the completed version with her.

Throughout the writing process, I shared small glimpses of the account with Annie, checking in about how she felt seeing her story rendered in different forms—sometimes as found poetry, sometimes as dialogue, sometimes in a more traditional narrative style. I remember the smile she gave me as she described how she felt reading these earlier field texts. She

told me she found it interesting that I had chosen to begin with poetry, noting it was not how she would have written her own story, yet she felt content. Encouraged, even.

For our first conversation—and the first time we met, as our paths had never crossed at the school—I invited Annie to join me at a small bakery near my house. By then, I was already in relationship with three other research participants at Mockingbird, each of whom I had met for an initial conversation a few weeks earlier. Three research participants would have been more than enough to work alongside, especially for a narrative inquiry dissertation; yet something about my phone call with Annie stayed with me. There was something in her voice, an intensity, that made me feel there was more to listen to, more to learn alongside her. We met after her workday, which she spends supporting elders living with dementia and intellectual disabilities as an occupational therapist. As we ordered a lemonade, I felt a flicker of hesitation. Beginning a relationship in the telling, with a conversation, is never simple. It carries a subtle strangeness—stepping into someone’s life with the quiet hope that they might allow you in, that they might share enough of themselves for a story, or a relationship, to take shape.

We chose a table at the far end of the café, a table that was a bit hidden to the rest of the place, with windows that portrayed the parking. Maybe not the best place to invite her, but we decided to meet somewhere close to the highway and in between her work and her drive back home. I took the chair facing back to the window, intentional, so I would not get interrupted by cars and people outside. The café was nearly empty. Someone sat by the window reading yesterday’s newspaper, which I found quietly amusing—but I kept that thought to myself and did not mention it to Annie. I took a sip of my lemonade and felt my heart racing. The music was louder than I would have liked, even if it happened to be one of my all-time favorites—a classic by Childish Gambino. There was something oddly comforting about it, familiar yet slightly out of place in that late afternoon. I ordered a slice of chocolate cake to go with my already sugary drink. I had not eaten much throughout the day; perhaps nerves had taken the edge off my appetite. I think I was actually very anxious to see Annie.

Over the course of exactly one hour, Annie shared story after story—moments lived alongside her daughters at the school, memories shaped by deep familiarity and an unwavering sense of commitment. She spoke with such confidence, grounded in her understanding of the school and of the indispensable role parents play in sustaining its life. There was nothing tentative in her voice; she knew where she stood and what her presence meant within that school

community. That confidence stirred something in me almost immediately. Within minutes, I felt the subtle shift of recognition—an intuitive sense that Annie was the missing piece I had not yet realized my research puzzle needed. Her stories did not simply add to the narrative inquiry; they expanded its contours, opening pathways I had not known to look for until she began appearing.

Annie: When I told my husband about your project, he said, ‘Annie, you don’t have the time—not with work, the kids’ school and projects, and the move coming up.’ And I told him, ‘I know. But we never have time for anything anyway.’ I feel like this is my hour—mine alone. A moment to maybe close a few doors, to look back on my path, on how I’ve grown. Maybe this is how I begin to carry a small part of the grief. As if it’s my final project...

*her final project
woven in words
a story becoming*

October 1, 2025

It is 15h45. I have just returned from a run—it felt unexpectedly good to move at this hour of the afternoon. I usually run in the morning, but today the day unfolded differently, other obligations taking precedence. As I keep reading Annie’s narrative account, I continue to feel an odd sense of estrangement from the document. It was as though I were reading something written by someone else. The stories I had retold and relived from my time alongside her seemed punctured with absences, as if essential threads had loosened or slipped away. There was so much more of Annie to write, to honour, to understand in her experience of being a parent in this school setting.

As I cool down from the run, I find myself drifting into questions about how Annie might speak about this project—this narrative account—to those around her. How would she describe it? What language or meaning would she give to it? I am already imagining how this final project might come to rest, or perhaps never fully settle. What is the moral, the lesson, the quiet heartbeat of her story that she hopes others will carry with them? Her project—woven through words, through pauses, through the quiet and the in-between—is, at its core, a story of becoming.

I keep wondering: how can this story stay alive? How can it keep being written, rewritten, touched, moved, played with? Perhaps the answer is simple. Stories continue when we

continue—when we keep telling, living, reliving, and retelling alongside one another and inquire into the experiences that shape who we are and who we are becoming.

I met Annie during her final year (2024–2025) at Mockingbird—after thirteen years of showing up, week after week, project after project, for each of her daughters: Kim, Coralie, and Lila, all of whom had made their way through the school. Her eldest, Kim, had just begun her first year of Cégep (2025), the pre-university program in Québec. As Annie shared with me: “You know, I really think there are kids for whom Mockingbird is a launchpad. Kim—she’s already president of the sovereigntist committee at Cégep du Vieux-Montréal. Two semesters in, and she’s organizing events and giving presentations”. Coralie, her middle daughter, was in grade 10 in a rigorous music program, immersed in her studies with a full-on performance intensity. Lila, the youngest, was completing elementary school and preparing to enter the same music program as her sister the following academic year (2025–2026).

Annie is, unmistakably, a proud mother. Yet it became clear to me over time that her pride does not rest solely on her daughters’ accomplishments or on her parenting; it is inseparable from the kind of education that Mockingbird made possible for them. The school did not simply accompany their family’s life—it shaped its very architecture. Some decisions, even significant ones, were set aside or delayed altogether to prioritize the girls’ education. Their long-imagined move to a “dream home” in a “dream neighbourhood,” for instance, was postponed for years. Mockingbird anchored them, held them, and in many ways determined the pace of their family’s becoming.

Annie: You see, we never moved because we didn’t want to leave the school. I mean, we’re not making a big move now... We didn’t move earlier because we couldn’t have managed the commute... It just wouldn’t have been doable. Now we’ll handle it for five weeks, but the school grounded us so deeply that we chose not to move. That’s really what it comes down to.

With the school’s strict zoning policies and long waitlists, Annie and Jason knew that relocating too soon could jeopardize their daughters’ place at Mockingbird. The risk felt too great; the school had become too integral to who their family was becoming. And so, the move was deferred for a while; only now, with Lila just weeks away from completing her final year of elementary school, has the family decided to take that long-postponed step.

I asked Annie how she had first learned about the school. Had she moved to the area already knowing that this was where she wanted her children to go? She shook her head. At the time, the neighborhood school where Kim was supposed to begin had too many children in the same age group, and the school board informed them she would be sent to a newly built school instead. Annie was not content with this news. Feeling that the decision had been made for her, she sought out an information session at the alternative school in her neighborhood. “It was like giving myself a sense of power,” she told me. “At the core, I told myself: this way, I will have made the choice”. Yet after sitting through the information session, something shifted. Annie explained: “It wasn’t just about choosing anymore, or about not feeling like the system was choosing for me. It was—oh no, this is the kind of education I want for them”. In other words, what began as an act of resistance, an attempt to reclaim her agency from a school system that routinely makes decisions on behalf of parents, quickly transformed into something deeper, more grounded, more certain. The choice was no longer merely strategic; it became an intentional commitment to a vision of education she recognized immediately as aligning with the life she wanted for her daughters.

Despite working full-time and carrying the weight—literal and otherwise—of her third pregnancy, Annie and Jason decided to take the leap and signal their interest in the school. They were invited for the interview, a pivotal moment designed not to assess their children, but to discern whether the parents understood the depth of commitment expected in this educational community. As Annie recounted, the principal looked at them and asked plainly: Are you ready to commit for the next seven years? We are not looking for parents who want to try this out. Annie still remembered how she responded. Gesturing toward her belly, she said: “Actually, with this, it’s thirteen years”. She told me that she had done the calculation long before walking into that room. Her reply was not a joke but a declaration—an articulation of the clarity with which she and Jason were choosing this path. It was, as she put it, a fully conscious commitment.

In a later conversation, I asked Annie to share more about what had drawn her to Mockingbird. She returned to the information session—the moment, as she described it, when something in her settled.

Annie: I walked into the school, and they gave me a tour. The first thing that stood out was that, as a parent, sending your child to a regular school you don’t really know—it kind of feels like stepping into the unknown. But then, once again, I was really impressed

by the children. They were fantastic. At the information session, the very first thing they did was let the children speak. I clearly remember a little girl from kindergarten. I know exactly who she is. She said, “I love it when we have costumes and get to dress up like princesses. But not this year, because we had lice, so they put the costumes away.” The teacher at the information session added, “Yeah, sometimes there are lice at school, but it’s no big deal.” The little girl continued, saying that usually it’s a lot of fun, but lately, it’s been a bit less so because of the lice. And I remember thinking—they didn’t plan this. That’s not something you usually hear in an information session. But I really remember that panel of kids. They still do it—it’s always the first thing they start with. Then they say, “Alright, it’s bedtime for the kids,” and the whole group of children heads out. I just remember how they made space for the children. That alone showed all the values of the school. I felt that during the information session, the school’s values were crystal clear. It was like: *“The very first thing we’re going to do is let the children speak. They’re going to explain what their school is about.”* And I thought—there’s no clearer way to put the child at the heart of your pedagogy than by starting an information session like that.

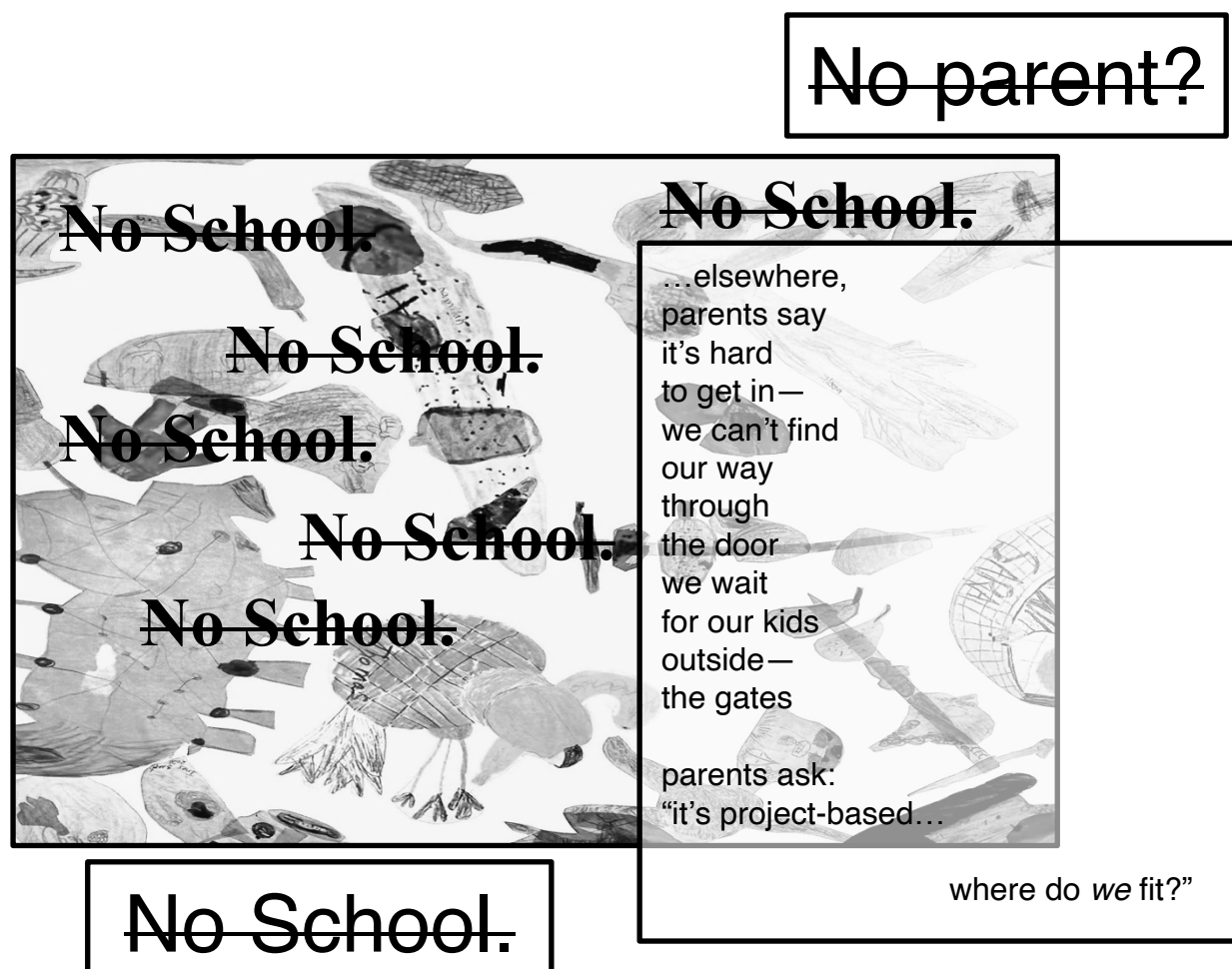
This child-centered pedagogy lies at the heart of this alternative school—and indeed, of all alternative schools in Québec. By enrolling her children here, she also recognized an opportunity to shift away from a competitive and grade-based system in which knowledge and competence are narrowly defined by a rigid and subject-driven curriculum. As Annie explained further:

I am someone who performed well at school. I saw that this school might push my kids away from being always in the performance and high achievement pressures. But now, and it’s funny, you know, they are all extremely high achievers. Coralie, in grade ten, she was mad because she didn’t win the academic excellence award. She has the highest average and she won so many other prizes, she cannot get them all... But yet, she was mad. She has 99 in math. I just didn’t know what to tell her...

For a moment, Annie saw Mockingbird as a way to resist the culture of competition and constant performance that so often presses upon individuals—including children, and perhaps just as intensely, their parents. “If this whole experience can create some distance from that pressure to perform—even for me, as a parent, to ask what the class average is—then of course I would choose to send my kids here. Why not, you know?”, she reflected. What drew her in further was

the school's commitment to project-based learning, and especially the fact that these projects were led by parents. This feature struck a deep chord. "I think my partner and I felt that we had something to offer, not as teachers, of course, far from it, but we had the ability to create something, to organize an activity. We saw that as added value," Annie explained. At Mockingbird, she recognized not only a different pedagogical approach but a community that invited parents to participate meaningfully in their children's education—an invitation she and her partner were ready, even eager, to accept.





September 30, 2025 (Orange Shirt Day)

The visual interpretation of Annie's words was the first piece I co-composed for her narrative account. It has gone through many iterations—not of the words themselves, but of their arrangement, the choreography of how they rest on the page and breathe in relation to the blank space around them. I kept returning to questions of placement, pacing, and weight: how might the story be felt before it is fully read?

I experimented endlessly, trying to retell and relive Annie's agency, her clarity and confidence within this school community. I shifted the text again and again, searching for a form that could hold the depth of her stories. The version I arrived at was the best I could manage, though never quite satisfying—an incomplete gesture toward something larger, more intricate than representation allows.

These lines arose from a story she shared during our first conversation. Annie explained how she and her partner, Jason, had taken on several roles within and beyond their alternative school community.

For years, Jason served on the RÉPAQ parent committee—a network bringing together at least one parent representative from each of the roughly fifty affiliated schools. They met to exchange concerns, offer mutual support, and circulate ideas back into their school communities. Although parent involvement is a foundational principle of all RÉPAQ schools, Annie noted that Jason had been struck by just how central parents are at Mockingbird. “If there were no parents, there would be no school,” she told me—repeating it many times and in different ways, as if to impress the weight of the truth upon the moment. “No Parent? No *School*.”

At Mockingbird, Annie’s place was never ambiguous; her presence was not only welcomed but required. While other RÉPAQ schools often involve parents as classroom helpers—preparing materials, supporting small groups, assisting teachers—Mockingbird goes further. Parents there are woven directly into the weekly structure of the school. Each family leads a collective project with the children, imagining, designing, and guiding the work overtime. During these project periods, teachers rarely intervene; the learning is held by parents themselves.

In creating the visual interpretation, I hoped to honour this way of being in the school—to gesture toward how Annie moves through this community with purpose, imagination, and a deeply rooted sense of belonging.

And yet every attempt revealed how much remains unspoken, how much exceeds the limits of any image or narrative. Perhaps that is the point: the visual, like the narrative, is always provisional, always reaching toward what cannot be fully held on the page.

Learning with, by, and from Projects

Among the many roles Annie held over her thirteen years at Mockingbird, one of the most demanding was her time on the school’s board of governors—a period marked by difficult decisions, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Annie: I was the one who had to tell parents they couldn’t come in anymore. I kept my foot in the door for as long as I could, just to keep the school open. But eventually, we

had to close it. Even then, I was outside—masked and visored—doing projects with the kids.

Her story reveals not only the weight of governance during crisis but also the depth of her commitment to the school's core philosophy. For Annie, the project is not an activity or an add-on; it is the heartbeat of the school. Group project is the anchor through which learning unfolds—learning with, by, and through the world, through material, through relationships, through the collective imagination of children and adults working side by side. It is, for her, the practice that holds the school together, the place where education becomes a lived and shared experience.

In our conversations, Annie and I often returned to the ways the school had evolved over the years—how it had adapted to provincial reforms by introducing new subject periods such as physical education and, later on, English. She recognized the value of these additions: the importance of movement, the gift of learning new languages, the expanded horizons they offer children. And yet, beneath her acknowledgment, there was this sort of apprehension. Annie worried that as more rhetoric and numerically-defined subject blocks were introduced, the precious time devoted to the project would begin to erode—and with it, the presence of parents.

Her concern was not simply about scheduling; it was, at its core, philosophical. She believed that parents, within their designated periods, could meaningfully weave these curricular elements into the project-based learning that has for a very long-time, defined the school. In her story, this is what distinguishes Mockingbird from other public schools: its refusal to separate subjects into discrete compartments, its insistence that learning can—and should—emerge from the living, a relational world that children and adults co-create together.

Through seven years of weekly school projects with each of her daughters, learning with and from projects became woven into the very fabric of Annie's family life. This way of learning, of being, of living, through projects did not stay within the walls of the school; it seeped into the conversations, practices, and shared imaginaries of their home.

Annie: Coralie is always in project mode. She bakes birthday cakes for her teachers, brings in extra materials, and gives personalized gifts. Once, she made a flag with a catchphrase her math teacher always said, got a few friends involved, and they pooled their money. She's constantly doing projects. That's just how it is. When she has to make a book cover, she'll do it in 3D with stickers and decorations—and it's actually funny.

She spends hours preparing things. I'm like, 'Are you sure the teacher asked for that?'

And she'll say, 'No, but what they asked was boring.'

At one point, Annie remarked that even the grandparents had internalized this way of being. She shared with me that they never asked about grades or report cards. Instead, their questions focused entirely on the projects: "My parents never ask about grades. It's really about the kinds of projects my daughters are doing with me... it's part of the family discourse".

*Learning through projects,
living through projects—
family's way of becoming*

Throughout my time alongside her, Annie recounted numerous stories of school projects spilling into the fabric of home life—afternoons spent crafting with Lila, evenings where the other daughters joined in, each contributing their own ideas, skills, and presence. The usual boundary separating home from school often seemed, in Annie's experience, dissolved. Instead of two discrete spheres, they appeared as a continuous terrain across which learning moved with ease, shaped by relationships and by the shared commitments of family members, teachers, and children. There was, between these landscapes, a subtle permeability—a quiet, continual movement—that held Annie and her daughters.

Annie: By not going to Mockingbird, I wouldn't have felt as comfortable doing projects with the kids or letting them do projects at home. But here, in this structure, I see them doing it. Like yesterday — my daughter asked, 'Mom, when do you need the kitchen?' And I'm like, 'Well, we should eat by 6, so Dad needs the kitchen by 5:30.' She says, 'Okay, I'll make some cookies and clean up after.' And that's because of this place. I really think it's because of here.

By participating in her children's education through the weekly projects at Mockingbird, Annie came to learn how to work with her children rather than simply for them—a shift that creates possibility for learning to unfold relationally rather than hierarchically.

Annie: I feel more connected to my children because I go to the school. I think that going to the school has changed my role at home. The kids want us to do things with them — and we do. We've learned how to work together with them. I'm not sure I would be doing it as much if I hadn't been involved every week in all kinds of wild things. The kids would tell me the wildest stories.

It became clear that Annie understood her presence at the school as a natural extension of the mother she was at home—someone who is continuously imagining, building, and bringing things to life alongside her children. Whether within the walls of their house or in the shared spaces of the school, she carried the same story, ensuring that something meaningful was always taking shape.

Annie: I just can't say no. My partner says it makes no sense. The girls come to me with, say, a cooking project, and I just can't refuse. I'll say, 'Okay, let's just think this through. Could we do it? It's 8 p.m., we start from scratch, it takes four hours. I'm in. You'll do the dishes, I'll handle this part, you take care of that—alright, let's go.' And then my partner's like, "I'm going to bed," but I just don't feel like saying no. It's like I don't want to be the one to put on the brakes on their ideas.

I remember when Annie shared this story with me, of her daughters wanting to do a cooking project, which I believe was some sort of fancy cake, I had chuckled. I was reminiscing on what I had done the night before: Sam, my daughter, asking me if we could paint a flowerpot. It was extremely close to her bedtime and my youngest was already sleeping. My husband was doing the dishes, and I remember hesitating before nodding, incapable of saying no to her and her projects. At the end of what could have been a clean activity ended up with so many different coloured sparkles on the kitchen table and floor, there was even glitter on my very white cat.

Growing up

Both of Annie's parents were teachers, her mom was a math teacher in adult education, and her father was in physics, and from an early age, the importance of school was woven into the family's narrative. She attended a private high school (the same school I attended for a couple of years). When it came time for university, her options were wide open—she could have pursued any path as she had one of the highest academic averages. She applied to a single university, the university where her father worked at, listing three programs: occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and nursing.

Melissa: Why occupational therapy?

Annie: It happened by accident. An occupational therapist came to my high school to present her profession during a career day. I thought it was kind of funny. But really, I was planning to go into physiotherapy, that was my path.

Melissa: To go into medicine afterwards? I see many people do that degree to continue in medicine afterwards.

Annie: No, I didn't want to go into medicine. In my family, medicine wasn't really well-regarded. I have a sister who's a pharmacist. I'm not sure why medicine wasn't seen as something to aspire to. I had the grades to get in. My sister, who went into pharmacy, had the grades to get into medicine too. And neither of us even applied.

Honestly, it was kind of a teenage thing. I wanted to go into physiotherapy. But I said, 'Let's put occupational therapy first — that'll be funny.' Back then, if you listed occupational therapy first, they didn't even evaluate the rest of your file. So I got accepted into occupational therapy. That was my only option. At the time, my dad worked at the Université de Montréal, and he told me, 'You have the grades to get into whatever you want'.

And today, I would be the worst physiotherapist — because I'm not someone who works systematically. I'm someone who thinks in a very holistic way and works through relationships. I work with elderly people — with severe dementia, intellectual disabilities. And it's all about the relational aspect, because when someone is completely demented, we're not in the same reality. I have to be with you in what you're feeling — in your pain, in listening, in being attentive, in taking my time.

I still find myself wondering how her experiences as an occupational therapist—particularly her work with elders living with dementia and intellectual disabilities—intersect with her stories as a mother and with her life alongside her daughters. I sense there is a quiet interplay between these roles, something subtle yet significant shaping how she sees children, learning, and care. With time, I know I will become more attuned—more wide-awake—to the ways these multiple identities converge, informing not only her present but also the stories she imagines for the future.

From what Annie has shared in our conversations so far, her memories of childhood are vivid and deeply textured. She often returns to images of her early years growing up in what appears to have been a tightly knit family. Many of her stories circle back to her parents' kitchen table, described almost as the heart of the household—a place where conversation, presence, and daily life gathered. Those early experiences seem to echo in the ways she now mothers, in the stories she tells about her daughters, and in how she understands the relational life of the school.

at the kitchen table

We would not go outside
before doing our homework

School was always too
important.

I carry that inside me.

Homework was like a party,
five of us
always sitting at the kitchen table,
my sisters with their agendas,
me writing out the subjects,
Math
Mathé
Mathéma
Mathémati
Mathématique.

My parents marking papers,
helping mom to mark
we had fun,
just sitting there—
a family,
living school.
Together.

My dad worked until 10 at night.
He sat at the computer.
Back then, the computer had just arrived in our home.

I always saw my parents working
in the evenings.
And they liked it.
They truly enjoyed it.

Even when I didn't have homework,
I sat with them at the table.
I was still young.

My sister was in university.
She'd ask me to help—
to color the blood vessels she was studying.
She would trace them,
and I would fill them in.

My dad gave me high school math to do.
Algebra—
I was learning it with him.

Sometimes I'd do math in my sleep.
That was the model I had.

I loved math.
But I hated reading.

My mom would make me read.
If I read,
I didn't have to do the dishes.
That was the deal.

I tried to protect my daughters
by coming here,
to Mockingbird.

Work should be well done.
That's important.
It's still a strong value instilled in me.
By my parents.

It was in university
that I started to drift.

I've always been a high achiever—
just less than the rest of my family.

My sisters did their Master's.
One even went to Italy for hers.
The other refused medicine—
she hated touching people.
She studied cartography:
satellites, rivers,
Canada from above.
And then there's the pharmacist—
ultra-specialized.
She's worked in neonatology
at the Children's Hospital
for 25 years.
She gives talks in England.

I don't have standard people in my family.

I'm like the black sheep.
The one who doesn't quite fit.

When I entered university,
 I told myself:
 I'm not doing a Master's.
 I went off-grid.
 Partied.
 I had nothing left to prove.
 In CEGEP,
 I had the highest *cote R* possible.
 In university,
 I didn't care anymore.
 I had a C average—
 and I was content.
 I got involved in student associations.
 I was no longer chasing approval.

[pause]

October 3, 2025

Annie and I have rescheduled our conversation for next week, after her work, in her new neighborhood. We had hoped to meet this week, but my husband had a last-minute thing added to his schedule the day we were supposed to meet so it was harder for me to get away.

I think I also wanted a bit more time with her account before we met again. I had told her that I printed this account so we could read and talk through it together.

As I return to Annie's stories—especially those of her childhood—I find myself pausing, wondering why I felt such a strong pull to write this one—why this story? Why did it feel necessary, almost urgent, to carry it forward?

Perhaps I believed that by telling it, I could better understand how she moves through the school, how her ways of being a

parent and a co-educator are entangled with those early experiences.

As though her childhood quietly shaped the mother, the community member, the creator she has become. And yet, I continue to ask myself:

why this story?

why did I need to share this part of her life?

More importantly—how will Annie read it? These are her words, spoken to me in French, now translated and reframed in English.

I held them carefully, trying to preserve her imagination, her creativity, the vivid, almost poetic way she described things.

I hope she is able to recognize herself in these lines—to feel seen, not interpreted.

Yet, these stories work on me in textured and unexpected ways.

They echo with pieces of my own memories: evenings spent at our kitchen table, doing homework while my mother prepared supper; the rich aroma of her Italian spaghetti sauce filling the house every Sunday and again on Tuesdays when we finished the leftovers; the way Mondays were always different, she'd say, "to keep some variety in our food groups." I ask myself: why does it matter to retell this story—these stories—and make them visible to others? What purpose does it serve beyond the two of us sitting across from each other, remembering, questioning, learning together?

Perhaps that is the question that lingers the longest.

[Refresh your eyes, dear Reader, we are boarding on a new scenery.]

[Play]

Melissa: Approval from who? Your parents?

Annie: Probably.

Melissa: Are your parents proud of you, of your career, you know?

[a few seconds of silence]

Annie: I think so, yes. My parents, it's super important to work. It's super important what is happening at work. That's the first question they ask me, yes, how my kids are doing, but how is work comes immediately after...

[pause; conversation interrupted]

Annie [continued]: ...In my family, school has always been super super important. I know I have that in me. I was seeing Kim, who decided to continue with the alternative school for high-school, and I know that adolescent development is very important — I get that. But at some point, school matters too. I even told the principal: I know you talk about attendance, but every time I come to the school for my youngest's project, my high school daughter is never in class — she's wandering the halls. That's a form of absenteeism you don't see. Because all the teachers allow students to leave class in the name of 'experiencing high school.' But at some point, she needs to be sitting down and learning. I never even receive any notice that she's been marked absent.

[pause]

In narrative inquiry, moving backward in time helps us attend to Dewey's (1938) notion of continuity—how past experience flows into present situations and conditions the possibilities for future experience. When Annie reflected on her childhood, one image returns with striking clarity: *the kitchen table*. Throughout our conversations, it became evident that this space carried a deep significance in both her remembered past and the life she now lives alongside her daughters. It was at this table that her parents worked late into the night—grading papers, preparing lessons, helping her sisters with assignments—her father tapping steadily at his computer while her mother read through stacks of student work. The scene evokes more than a domestic space; it reveals a family culture deeply rooted in diligence, academic excellence, and a shared commitment to learning. Her parents were not merely present observers of her education; they were actively involved in it, reinforcing both performance and a strong sense of responsibility. This early landscape—this table, this steady rhythm of work and learning—continues to echo through Annie's present stories, shaping the ways she mothers, collaborates, and shows up within the life of the school.

Annie recalled, with a sense of both fondness and weight, how her mother would ask her to read rather than do the dishes; an act that subtly affirmed intellectual work as a priority over anything else really. These early experiences formed a powerful narrative: success was earned

through consistent effort and high achievement. When Annie entered university, however, she felt the need to push from that narrative. She described “rebellious” against the family’s high-performance ethos, challenging the idea that anything less than excellence was failure. And yet, even as she recognized this tension within herself, she chose to raise her own children in a school setting that resists academic competition. In sending them to an alternative school where there is no ranking, no grades, and students learn from their interests, she is actively stepping away from the pressure to perform—offering them a different kind of educational path.

October 7, 2025

Note to self: when I find the courage, I need to ask my mom if I can look through old family photo albums—just to see if there is a picture of our kitchen table.

Our kitchen was really two rooms in one, divided not by walls but by purpose. There was the dining room, reserved for company and special occasions, and then there was our space—the small circular table attached to the peninsula counter, where everyday life happened.

Five chairs circled that table, though squeezing in a sixth was nearly impossible. That was part of its charm, I think—the closeness it demanded. My spot was always the same, across from my sister, on the side of the island. From there, I could see everything: the stove where supper simmered, the patio door that caught the last of the evening light...

I hear laughter as I return to childhood moments of sitting around that kitchen table—laughter so uncontrollable that my mother would refuse to pour us a glass of milk until we had finished what was on our plates, afraid it would spill through our nostrils (mostly mine) as we laughed at everything and at nothing at all...

As I traced Annie’s life stories backward and forward, through time, and within place, it became clear that the values rooted in those early kitchen table experiences continue to echo in her present life as a mother. Through her reflections, we see the enduring complexity of holding on to values of hard work and responsibility, even as she seeks to loosen the grip of performance-driven expectations for the next generation.

[play; conversation continues]

Melissa: For me, having dealt with performance anxiety all my life, I wonder how to not transmit this anxiety to my kids.

Annie: By coming here, I had the impression...because they do not have numerical grades. I thought that it would be better. Like Kim, she rebelled on me in like grade 9-10, her high school was not easy. I wanted to help her. She did not want my help anymore. I was like 'no problem but go get the help you need'. But you know, Coralie, who is at the end of her high-school, I still study with her, every night at the kitchen table. I think there's a lot of potential in the alternative high-school. It's just that they need to get more structured — they're not there yet. Personally, I appreciate Mockingbird because there's still a certain level of rigor in the teaching there. Maybe other alternative schools are different. Some have even closed down. I'm friends with [some parents at Mockingbird and a father] said, 'I went to Mockingbird in Grade 3. I could barely read. Back then, 45 years ago, they just let you be. If you weren't interested in reading, then you didn't read.' For me, I wouldn't have wanted my child's education to depend only on what interests them. You have to know how to read—it's boring, but that's just the way it is.

As Annie shared these stories, the image of the kitchen table continues to rise with increasing clarity. I picture a round, wooden table—its surface softened by years of use, its brown finish slightly worn by daily life. I imagine it as round because, unlike its rectangular counterpart, it has no head, no privileged seat from which authority flows. A round table offers a different geometry of relation: every voice meets at eye level; each perspective becomes equally visible, equally possible.

Annie: You know, over the weekend, at one point I was like, 'Okay girls, we only have one kitchen table—we need to eat at some point.' But everyone's homework was spread out all over it. I mean, it was everywhere. Kim had left without picking anything up—it was a total mess, papers all over the kitchen table. But then someone was making food, there was a drink poured, and we were all sitting together. And you know, it was kind of great—Kim was there too, sitting at the table with us. She's not home very often, but when she has studying to do, she comes and sits with us.

In Annie's stories, it is around this table that learning became a collective undertaking, where the familiar boundaries between home and school thinned. The table held more than meals or homework; it held a way of being together, a place where learning was lived rather than delivered.

Annie's Winter

I feel it
I am ready
I've thought it through — this parental engagement
I'm living it
I'm telling you
I'm in the doing
I've always gone above and beyond
I think that's the point
I also think a project means being in the doing
I think that letting children choose their own project—
I think that brings in the parent
I walk into the school
I walk into my home
I know everyone
I never get tired of it
I'm all in
I'm more connected with my kids
I go to school
I can't say no
I'm in the doing
I have a kid — he's not there yet
I have another one—he does every station
I try
I give him challenges
I'm telling you — the magic happened
I'm loving watching them become amazed.

Spring

I think there are easy connections to make

I'm an occupational therapist

I am me

I don't think it's the Mockingbird's parent who is like this

I think it's me who is like this

I put myself in the position of co-educator

I arrive in my project

I hate it when they're on the computer all the time

I find it doesn't create teamwork

I'm coming here to learn

I don't get tired of it

I'm still truly amazed by what they're capable of doing

I was president of the council

I can work weekends on projects with Lila

I've reached the point of traveling

I was telling people "we're going to follow the 12-year-old to New York"

I don't care about New York

I think it's my daughters who impressed me the most about the trip

I see my children growing up by being with them at school

I can't reach one child

I can't get her into this project

I try, I try

I throw out lifelines

I go sit beside her

I had her in another project

I can't get her on the train at the same speed as us

I think it's part of our family discourse
I don't know about other children, but my children are grateful
I don't know if I'd be as comfortable doing projects with the children
I see them doing it at school
I'm going to make cookies
I think it's because of here
I think it's because of Mockingbird

I need to see that there's still structure with teachers
I consider teachers as the experts of the place
I'll turn right if they tell me to turn right
I consult them
I previously went to see her
I can't manage with this child
I told her afterwards, listen it's day and night
I'm not a teacher
I don't have to manage a group of 20
I have to manage a group of 8
I have planning to do for the hour
I'm sure the impact of sub-groups is major for learning
I'm convinced
I think, in terms of oral presentation, it's a strength of Mockingbird
I see all of this

I still do homework with my kids
I grew up in that
I used to do my sisters' agendas

I'm not even able to tie the knot myself
I try to teach them to tie knots

I feel less equipped
 I'd like to do the project
 I'm like a locomotive in the project, the parent
 I'm always at the limit where there is no limit
 I think they appreciate me for that

I don't know that I'm the model parent
 I would have liked to be told, you're good, Annie
 I don't get told that because they don't have that expectation
 I help the children grow in this
 I think we must do projects at the children's level

I'm high-performing, but actually, it does me good to be here
 I'm happy that my daughters don't have grades
 I can't compare them
 I could never measure up to my sisters, they're super high-performing
 I was a bit the black sheep at home

I'm happy there are no grades, my children
 I know I have a performance discourse at home
 I'm unable to get rid of it
 I find we work on quality instead of quantity
 I feel accompanied by teachers to go more toward quality

I want to perform
 I want to be a good co-educator
 I'm always in that
 I want it to work
 I want them to be in learning

Summer

I reflected on the last conversation

I think I wanted to hear from them that it's enough

I'm still that little Annie,

needing someone to say: you're doing good work

I don't want parents to be evaluated

I just want them to be there

I should be able to know this myself

I should be able to say:

the children arrive in good spirits,

they are focused, they create

they are making connections with what they learned

I should be capable to appreciate what I do

I need to remind myself:

it's working, Annie

to trust myself

We're moving forward

We realized that it's at the children's level

We need to lower our bar so it's the children leading

We always work in projects

We are a family super constant

We are a family that was really reliable

The stories Annie shared with me over the past few months began to reveal subtle yet meaningful resonances. As I listened back to the recordings of our conversations—and read and reread the transcripts—I found myself becoming wide-awake to Annie's "I-story"¹. I started highlighting, in green, each moment she spoke about being at the school, each instance where she used "I". This small, almost ritual gesture shifted the way I listened. It attuned me to the

¹ While I was working on Annie's narrative account and feeling momentarily stalled, I returned to Lucy Delgado's (2022) dissertation and was drawn to their methodological approach. In particular, Delgado traces participants' internal dialogues by attending closely to the "I" in their story, following Gilligan et al.'s (2003) listening guide.

contours of how she understood herself: a mother bearing profound responsibility for shaping her daughters' experiences, and someone whose presence in the school was not incidental but constitutive of the world they inhabit together.

Melissa: What is the craziest project you did?

Annie: We just started. No thinking, just doing. There I was, in the old school building, hanging stuff from the suspended ceiling. I'd pulled out all kinds of materials, and I told the kids, 'Have fun. Let's try to make balancing games, you know?' Just for a while. Then one kid doesn't get it. Little Oscar. I remember him. He just couldn't do it. He didn't understand. He'd place one thing on one side, and it would tip over or make a noise. He kept trying, but he could never get things to balance. Meanwhile, another kid, Mickaël, flew through every single station. Boom, boom, boom, boom. All of them. And I was like, 'Okay, how am I going to challenge you now?' I gave him new challenges, pushed him further. But Oscar, nothing worked. Throughout the whole project, we did tons of stuff. We called it the *Simple Machines Project*. We did slacklining outside to work on balance. We practiced yoga to feel balance in our bodies, because it's something we live through physically. These were all separate sessions. We read about Calder...the artist who made mobiles. His exhibit had just been at the Fine Arts Museum, and that's what inspired the whole project. I had gone with Coralie to see it, and she said, 'Let's do this!' We watched a short video about Calder and looked at his sculptures. Then suddenly, Oscar lit up. Out of nowhere. He started imagining. 'What if it's like this, and then like that...' He totally got it. Meanwhile, Mickaël looked completely bored, like he had no idea what we were talking about. Oscar could've given a whole two-hour speech on the topic. I was just stunned. *this* is why we do it. They were trying to talk to each other, trying to connect, even though they didn't really understand each other. Then came time to build their mobiles. Mickaël's was made of three wooden planks. He drilled one end in place so it stood upright. It was brown and that's it. For Oscar, he made a tree out of tissue paper. He hung it from the back, because we were making a museum for our final presentation, with leaves falling underneath and added lime. Yellow lime. And a golden tree. Then he explained why. And the other kids listened...and it was genius. And the other, Mickaël, with his very basic brown mobile...You see? Same theme. Completely different expressions. That's what it's all about. It's so typical, and it's beautiful. That's

what it's like when the magic happens, when everything just clicks. I love that. All the kids had their own different projects. They were all super creative things, and the two of them were at completely opposite ends of the spectrum. It was perfect to witness.

What struck me first about the story above were the people who inhabited it. Although the project technically belonged to her daughter, the story was not about her. Instead, it centered on two of her classmates, Oscar and Mickaël, whose ways of struggling, persisting, and flourishing unfolded in distinct and meaningful rhythms. For Annie, the heart of the project lay not in her own child's accomplishments but in what the experience revealed about others. It was, at its core, a story of presence, of noticing, of witnessing. Through her involvement, she helped create the conditions in which these two boys could shine, each in their own time, in their own way.



Visual Field Text 6

Photograph taken while lingering with memories of the locomotives that carried me through childhood, and wondering about the ones my own children may one day board—tracing the tracks of where we have been, and quietly asking where they might carry us next.

locomotives

We're like locomotives,
us parents—
pulling the project along,
making sure everyone's
on board.
Guardrails up,
so no one
falls
into the gaps.
Learning by doing.
I'm not here just to be here.
I'm here
because I believe
learning happens
through doing.
They ask,
"What's the point
of learning to count?"
And I say—
Come.
I'll show you
why it matters.
I'll show you
how it's useful.
locomotives

When children choose the project they want to take part in, teachers follow a thoughtful process. The child presents their project idea during one of the daily class meetings, and classmates who are interested raise their hands to signal their interest in taking part in the project. The child then selects one peer to join them, and the teacher decides on the rest of the group. When I asked Annie how she thought children decide which projects to join, she explained: “I think that kids choose the parent. I know in fact that my kids will choose their projects based on the parent they want to work with. That’s maybe why sometimes we get the same kids for a few projects”. Her response reminded me of the metaphor introduced earlier in this narrative account—*the child who sees the apple*. For Annie, each parent brings a unique “facet” of the apple, a distinct contribution to the child’s development. Perhaps even, something that a child, at that moment in their life, needs from a certain parent. She views this as a gift: the opportunity to learn more deeply through the diverse strengths, styles, and presences of different adults.

Annie described herself as *très cartésienne*—logical, structured, and consistent in how she takes up what teachers are teaching. “I’m really structured,” she told me. “I apply what the teachers are teaching. I see the content through the homework my kids need to do”. And yet, what she valued most was precisely the contrast: the ways other parents, with different dispositions and ways of engaging, complemented what she brought. For Annie, this diversity was not merely enriching; it was essential. She offered a moment from our final “official” research conversation at school that made this visible. At the last general assembly for graduating families (May, 2025), each family was invited to speak. Annie and Jason chose to take the floor.

sérénité * serenity

It was half improvised.

Not improvised.

We practiced a bit.

Thirteen years

we waited

for this moment.

We knew—

this moment mattered.

What do we want to leave as a message?

Jason wanted to leave some things.
There were things I wanted to say, too.
My husband—
he wanted a PowerPoint.
We're structured, right?
We'll answer each other.
Create a dynamic.

Leave something behind
for the school.
Something that carries.

They all attended.
New families,
sixteen of them—
a record year.
Already engaged.

The message I wanted to leave behind:

You come
because you want
to be a pedagogue.

We value projects.
We value parents.

You can't be
a consumer parent.
You must be
a participating one.

Show up.
 Take part.
 Not just for your kid—
 for the whole community.

If you come
 to benefit
 without contributing—
 you're not welcome here.

Stamp yourself in.
 Join the committees.
 Work with the seven other kids—
 not just the eighth
 who belongs to you.

Then—
 she came next.
 My anti-mommy.
 my anti-*me*.
 My opposite.

I sit down,
 still trembling
 from what I had shared.
 Thinking—
*Did I just put too much weight
 on their shoulders?*
 It wasn't perfect,
 but we were organized.
 Punchlines. Slides.

As always.

She stood.

She smiled.

*So, no stress,
you sixteen new families—
there's this,
(pointing to us)
and there's this—me.*

Je suis tout croche.
I'm all twisted.
I did not plan.
I'm assuming as I go.

And I thought—
This is the richness.

A child might say:
*My mother is like this,
but I see myself
in that other adult.*

She was the only one
who could have spoken after me.

So different—
a perfect example
of the alternative.

*Thank you daughter
for accepting a mother
who always arrives
a bit crooked,
disorganized.*

*Thank you
for helping me
get it together
so many times.*

*When you see a child
make a good decision—
even a small one—
tell them.
It may be the only time
they hear it all day.*

That, too,
was a message
for new parents.

*You have power
in these projects
to offer one word—
encouragement.*

Her words—
clear,
like a rock dropped in water.

*When my child
was told he wasn't making
good decisions,
I felt—
incompetent.
As a mother.
Because sometimes,
he does make good decisions.*

I was falling
into her fragility.

A different kind of mother.
Super adequate.

We do not create parents.
There are just different models.

That is the richness we have
to hold on to.
It is a responsibility.
To not take lightly.
And we forget—
it is not a given.

It is a gift,
this capacity
to put our hands
into the lives
of many children—
together.
***sérénité* * serenity**

October 7, 2025

I am meeting Annie tonight to negotiate the full narrative account. I still remember something Vera once mentioned when I asked how we know when a narrative account is *ready*. In her calm, steady voice, she said something like: “When you find yourself wondering if it’s almost finished, that’s how you know.” Maybe that is why I have waited this long—more than three months—before sharing this narrative account with Annie. I kept feeling as though I had only brushed the surface of who she is, only begun to glimpse the stories she carries with her. To offer her this version felt premature, as if I were handing over a map with most of its contours still missing.

I find myself wanting to return to that word she offered: *sérénité*. She chose it during the very first parent meeting, when her eldest had just begun kindergarten, after parents were invited to describe how they were feeling. I continue to wonder why serenity. What did it mean to her then, within the uncertainty and anticipation of entering a new school community.

What stories does it carry today?



Visual Field Text 7

¹ After meeting in October 2025 to discuss further pieces of Annie's narrative account, we left the restaurant with a shared understanding: we would meet once more, after she had read the account in its entirety—not only in fragments. I felt a swell of emotion knowing that her stories now rested in her own hands. That evening, in November 2025, Annie sent me a photograph, following her initial reflections by text messages. In the image, her three daughters sit together at the kitchen table—a scene she tells me has become increasingly rare. Kim, the eldest, is often out or studying in her room; Coralie has claimed a corner of the house as her “office.”

Sitting with this photograph, the kitchen table in Annie's story becomes so vivid, so alive: its enduring presence in her past, its careful carrying into the present, and the tenderness it holds as her daughters grow into lives increasingly their own.



Visual Field Text 8

² I sent this photograph to Annie during the holiday break (2025) after finding my children under the kitchen table, sharing a snack and searching for the final pieces of a puzzle I had placed *on* the table moments earlier. The room still carried the traces of their morning. As Sam and Louis leaned towards one another, Annie came to mind, along with the kind of kitchen table stories I am learning to co-compose alongside my children and family: a place where pieces are gathered and regathered, attention is shared, and a common world comes into *being*.

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Chapter Four: Mia's Narrative Account

June 20, 2025

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Mia's narrative account!!

I am so happy to have you join the conversation. Yes, I like to call this a conversation. Please, make yourself at home. I like to imagine you at your favorite local coffee shop, enjoying a drink you love—maybe a steaming cup of strong coffee, a tall cold glass of H₂O clinking with ice, or a teapot steeped a little too long. At this point, hopefully, you are around one third through the dissertation—unless you are like me and tend to jump around. If you have been reading it in order, you will notice that this is the second out of four narrative accounts. By now, you are starting to get a sense of how I think through my research—how I engage with narrative inquiry, how I understand the study of experience, how I imagine myself in the midst of research participants' storied lives.

☺

In narrative inquiry, researchers are invited to *relationally live alongside* research participants, attending to experience as it unfolds, is negotiated, and is co-composed. This ethical and relational orientation is what first drew me to the methodology during my master's studies. Unlike other qualitative approaches that maintain analytic distance, narrative inquiry asks us to enter experience with care, openness, and responsibility. What most distinguishes it, for me, is this commitment to relational living and its insistence that knowledge emerges through sustained, personal, and co-created engagement with those whose experiences we seek to understand.

As Clandinin (2023) noted,

...the relational—the relational between the person and his/her world; a temporal understanding of the relational between past, present, and future, including the relational in the intergenerational; the relational between person and place; the relational between events and feeling; the relational between us as people; the relational between the physical world and people; the relational in our cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives; and so on. Thinking relationally, then, is part of thinking narratively and of thinking narratively as a narrative inquirer. (p. 12)

Within this methodological tradition, knowledge, experience, and story are co-composed through the very act of living alongside others—through the stories told, the ones lived yet unspoken, the ones that linger, and those ultimately carried forward into research texts.

I have been immersed in the school where this narrative inquiry unfolds since September 2024. From the moment I first stepped in the building, I felt an immediate, almost intuitive recognition that this was the place—this community of parents, these stories—where my dissertation was going to take shape. As I composed my narrative beginnings, drafted the proposal, and navigated the university’s research ethics process, I found myself continually imagining how I might enter into relationship with parents, how I might come alongside them in ways consonant with the relational commitments of narrative inquiry.

Sometime in the 2024-2025 school year, during one of the teachers’ Wednesday afternoon meetings at Mockingbird, I was invited to share the contours and colors of my proposed study and how I envisioned engaging with parents as research participants. When I finished speaking, one teacher glanced towards a colleague with a knowing look and said, with a kind of certainty that surprised me: “Mia will definitely agree—she is the ideal participant” (Field Text in Melissa’s Research Journal, 2024). That brief remark marked more than an invitation to a potential participant; it opened a space of relational entanglement.

The *Ideal Participant*¹

Mia is the mother of four children who have each, in their own time and rhythm, passed through the halls of Mockingbird. Maverick, the eldest, now moves through his years of high school (2024–2025), still sharing a building with his younger siblings—an overlapping of worlds that feels distinctly Mockingbird. Devin, spirited and endlessly energetic, is in grade five. Everlee, bright and curious, is finding her footing in grade three, exploring the school with a quiet confidence. And Darius, the youngest, has just begun kindergarten (2024–2025), entering Mockingbird with the natural ease of a child already born into its fabric.

“She is always at school,” another teacher added during that reunion sometime in 2024 (Field Text in Melissa’s Research Journal, 2024).

By training Mia is an early childhood educator, yet she is something distinct here—something more intimate, more porous. She lives alongside her children’s school days. A stay-at-home mom, perhaps, but truly, a stay-at-*school* mom.²

I wonder, dear Reader, what your first impression of Mia might be.
If you were to see her standing in the hallway, kneeling beside a child,
carrying cardboard for a project,
or simply lingering near the coat hooks—
what story would you compose in your mind?
What assumptions would rise, unbidden,
from the sparse details offered here?

One teacher confides, with a knowing smile, “She loves to talk,” as though this single trait could sketch the outline of an entire personality.

Another adds, almost as explanation, “She has a lot of time” (Field Text in Melissa’s Research Journal, 2024).

And I find myself wondering—How do they see her? Do they read her smile and constant presence as signs of a “yes-mom,” someone reliably agreeable, always available, perhaps too available? Do they perceive her steady involvement as an overabundance—a voice that is too present, too insistent, too much in spaces where quiet compliance is often preferred? Or do they glimpse something else entirely: the deeper strata of her presence, the stories she carries in the pauses between school projects, the family histories folded into her daily crossings of home and school, the intuitive understandings she accumulates simply by walking the same paths her children walk?

In the pages that follow, I offer a *snapshot* into Mia’s experiences—her stories of mothering in this alternative school, of appearing and reappearing in the daily life of this community, and of being woven into its colors in ways both visible and subtle.

I chose letter writing as the form for Mia's narrative account because it encouraged me to dwell more intentionally in our relationship—to continue living, being, and thinking alongside her. Writing to and alongside her, rather than merely about her, became a methodological gesture, one that moved me closer to understanding the ethical and relational commitments at the heart of narrative inquiry. As Caine (2007) reflected in her dissertation:

Having chosen a research methodology that allowed me to dwell in this place was equally important. Narrative inquiry is a methodology that calls forth a relational inquiry. As a narrative inquirer I not only listen to the stories told but also live alongside research participants for extended periods of time. It is when I live alongside others, take time out

despite timetables, dissertation deadlines and other things that I am often surprised and begin to see differently (Veroff, 2002). It is in the midst of living alongside (Craig & Huber, 2007) that I have the prospect to touch and be touched and to explore the markings on skin. (p. 53)

As a beginning narrative inquirer, my relationship with Mia gave texture and shape to these ideas. What I had been reading around relational ethics in this relational methodology began to shift—from something conceptual to something lived.

In the letters that follow, I hope to not only retell moments of Mia's experiences as a mother in this alternative school, but also to offer glimpses of my own learning journey of understanding relational ethics and, of possibilities and responsibilities that emerge between researcher and participant—to touch and be touched, to witness and be witnessed, to trace another's experience as my own is subtly retold, reshaped, and relived. These letters are, in this sense, as much about her stories as they are about the marks we leave on one another as we journey, however briefly, in relation.

Enjoy,

Melissa

¹Notation written on August 4, 2025.

Last week, I met with both of my doctoral supervisors to discuss the narrative account that follows. Marie-Hélène and I brought many questions to Vera about the delicate craft of composing narrative accounts—what they are, how they take shape, and how they might be written with attentiveness, respect, and care.

Across the many dissertations I have read, narrative accounts appear in countless forms, yet they share a common intention: what Clandinin et al. (2014) described as “interpretive constructions of individual experiences attentive to the three-dimensional inquiry space” (p. 51)—that is, to place, temporality, and sociality.

During our conversation, one remark from Vera stayed with me. She spoke of the strangeness of being considered the ideal participant. The phrase lingered, unsettling in its clarity. It made me pause. How might other parents—perhaps even you, dear Reader, should you find yourself within these pages, knowing that teachers, and myself, as a narrative inquirer, see Mia in this way? What, precisely, makes her the “ideal” participant?

There is also this question that continues to linger—*was she also imagined as the ideal parent?* These questions continue to trouble and guide me. They draw my attention not only to Mia's positioning but also to what such perceptions disclose about teachers, the school, and the broader culture of partnership that frames their everyday interactions.

Marie-Hélène also wondered how Mia herself might feel when she reads my description of her—“*a stay-at-home mom, perhaps, but truly, a stay-at-school mom*”. I made a note to ask her, to listen closely to what this portrayal evokes for her as both a mother and a research participant in this unfolding narrative inquiry.

²Notation written on October 9, 2025.

I read parts of the narrative account aloud to Mia. I (re)translated certain passages into French—pausing at moments that felt tender or revealing—to be sure these were stories she wished to have retold, to make visible, to live again in written form. I asked her how she felt about my description of her as a stay-at-school mom. She smiled and replied, “*Qu'est-ce que tu veux je te dise?—c'est moi*” / (“*What do you want me to tell you?—it's me*”). After a brief pause, she added, “*Même si cette année (2025-2026) je suis un peu moins présente à l'école, je suis pas mal toujours où mes enfants sont* » / (“*Even though this year (2025–2026), I'm a little less present at the school, I'm still where my children are*”).

March 14, 2025

Dear Mia,

I hope you are having a wonderful morning.

Tomorrow marks our first official conversation, and I find myself in the unusual position of approaching it without the familiar nerves that typically accompany research conversations. I suspect this calmness arises from the genuine enthusiasm you expressed when I first mentioned the project—a warmth that immediately placed me at ease. Long before we were introduced, I had noticed you during my time at Mockingbird. You moved through the hallways with the quiet assurance of someone who belonged. At first, I assumed you were a teacher.

When I mentioned to a teacher that I hoped to recruit parents for the study, she responded without hesitation: “Mia would be the ideal participant. She is always around and willing to help” (notes from my research journal, 2025). She promised to introduce us the next time our paths crossed. It was the second time your name surfaced. The first was during a teacher meeting when I presented my study and shared that I would soon begin recruiting parents.

Our introduction arrived sooner than anticipated, though not in the way I imagined. Early one morning, I received a last-minute message from a teacher at Mockingbird—her son had been ill through the night, and she needed someone to cover her class. I offered to step in. When I arrived, I made my way downstairs towards the lockers and found two women deep in conversation. One of them was you. In that moment, I realized you were likely a parent, not a teacher. And I recognized the woman beside you—she had been at the school the previous week with her two young children and an impossibly endearing puppy. If I am being truthful, it was the puppy that had first drawn my attention.

Somewhat shyly, I asked, “*No puppy this morning?*”

You both laughed, as if you had just been talking about the new addition to the family.

Then you turned to me with curiosity and asked, “*Are you filling in today?*”

I nodded. “*Yes—though it is a bit of a juggle. I have got schoolwork of my own to manage as well.*”

As I explained what “school” meant in my case, I found myself adding, almost reflexively, “*Actually, I am also looking to recruit parents for a study I am conducting. Would either of you be interested?*” And just like that, you became my very first research participant. We exchanged phone numbers without hesitation, agreeing to coordinate a time for our initial conversation.

Later that afternoon, I texted you in a carefully professional tone, signing my name even though I knew my name already appeared on your screen.

Perhaps it was my way of holding a small measure of distance—an instinctive attempt to preserve the boundary between researcher and participant, even as I sensed that our relationship would soon move well beyond formality. Your kindness was immediately perceptible. From the moment we met, it was clear why teachers had described you as the “ideal” participant—someone prepared to enter fully into the process—already attentive and engaged. Even through our brief exchanges—mostly logistical messages arranging tomorrow’s rendezvous—I have already come to appreciate your intensity, your curiosity, and your willingness to step into this narrative inquiry with openness. I find myself genuinely looking forward to our first conversation.

Warmly,

Melissa

March 15, 2025

Dear Mia,

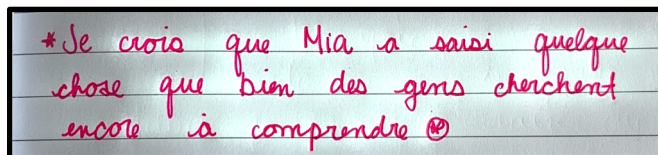
I am sitting in my car, parked in front of my house, quietly gathering myself after our conversation. I feel overwhelmed—not only by the depth and generosity with which you shared your story today, but also by a sudden, disorienting awareness of my own life as a researcher, a scholar, and a mother, and of what it means to navigate these roles simultaneously. I remain here because I am emotionally and physically drained (I always forget how much energy these kinds of conversations require), and because I am not yet sure how to hold all that you entrusted to me.

Yet, there is also a more practical truth: the moment I open the front door, I will step immediately into my role as *maman*. Sam and Louis will likely run towards me, the kitchen will be full of dishes, laundry baskets overflowing with clean but unfolded clothes, and the pulse of home life will resume without pause.

You told me several times today that you were impressed by how much I am attempting to do—finishing a PhD, juggling research assistantships, teaching, and raising two young children.

Yet during our conversation, it was I who felt in awe of you. I found myself thinking about the kind of mother you are—the intentional way you have chosen to set aside other parts of your life to be fully present with your children, to walk alongside them in their schooling and in the everydayness of their lives. There is something profoundly beautiful in the way you care for your family, with a steadiness, patience, and clarity that feels both ordinary and extraordinary.

As you spoke about your choices, I could not help but reflect on my own. The way you center your children—without hesitation, without apology—made me pause and wonder about the mother I am, and the mother I aspire to become. I want to share with you something I wrote down in my car, before my drive back home.



*Je crois que Mia a saisi quelque chose que bien des gens cherchent encore à comprendre ☺

I think Mia has figured out something many of us are still searching for.

(notes in my research journal, March 2025)

Thank you for trusting me with your story.

Melissa

March 16, 2025

Playfulness with Mia's words

It's the life we choose—

a narrow townhouse,
walls close but warm,
no grand vacations,
only the quiet abundance
of enough:
the six of us
held together in a shared breath.

My children have never known daycare.
The morning after my son was born,
I was already back at school—
my newborn wrapped against my chest,
the others waiting for us
on the far side of the hallway.

They came with me, always.
They wandered through projects,
slept curled against me,
grew up inside the clouds
of chalk dust, glue sticks,
and children's laughter.

I breastfed between projects,
between classrooms.
Their playgrounds, the scraps of cardboard, wool,
and wood we used in whatever we were making.
The teachers who steadied their first steps
now call them their students.

My son—one day old—
was held gently in her arms.
Next year, that same hand
will guide him through math,
through reading,
through becoming.

They are more than teachers—
and we are more than parents.
We are kin,
family.

This school has been stitched
into our family story,
threaded through each morning's rush
and every tender letting-go.

It is a choice—
this life of family projects
and lullabies,
of showing up
again and again,
where my children and I
learn to grow
together,
to learn to love
ourselves
and others.

It is, still,
the life we choose.¹

¹Notation written on July 30, 2025.

I reread this piece today, months after writing it, and I can still recall the feeling that accompanied its composition. In some ways, I think I was trying to confront my own assumptions about who these alternative schools are imagined for and what kinds of families they are thought to serve. It is often the first question people ask: Isn't this clearly for the privileged? Just this past week, on two separate occasions, I found myself describing my research and the deep affection I have developed for the school. Both times, friends responded that such a school seems designed for a privileged few. And while I do not entirely disagree, my time in the school, and especially the conversations I have had with you, suggest a more nuanced landscape. It is also about the kind of life one chooses—or strives—to live. You have often spoken of the pressures you feel: the implicit expectation that you should return to work, particularly with four children in a small home and the rising cost of groceries. A second income would undoubtedly ease the strain.

There is also the broader societal pressure placed on women to be financially independent, to contribute economically, to avoid being seen as dependent on a partner. And yet, you remain. Not out of ease or convenience, but out of conviction—a belief in being fully present in your children's learning and becoming.

That choice, too, is labour... No? Hm.

I would see this as: *action* (Arendt, 1958). It is intentional, demanding, and deeply relational work.

I think as well of the single mother I recently chatted with—a nurse working overnight shifts so she can be present with her children during the day. Or the parents who rearrange their professional lives: reducing hours, declining promotions that require travel, making deliberate financial decisions so that they can invest time in their children's education. These are not uniformly stories of material abundance. They are stories of intention, sacrifice, and value.

So, while my friends are not wrong to raise questions about privilege, I believe it is equally important to make room for these other "truths".

March 17, 2025

Dear Mia,

I hope you are well.

I have just finished transcribing our first conversation. It lasted more than two hours—far longer than I had planned. (A note to my future self: aim for an hour next time.) Yet, in truth, neither of us seemed eager to leave that small table tucked at the back of the restaurant. And the spaghetti was unforgettable. What struck me most, as I listened and then listened again to the recorded conversation, was how natural our exchange felt.

We spoke as though we had known each other for years—two longtime friends catching up on the unfolding of our lives. We went so easily into deeply personal terrains: giving birth, breastfeeding, navigating adulthood with ADHD, and so many more topics that I would not share with someone whom I just met. Our stories slipped in and out of one another, woven together almost effortlessly.

And then, as our conversation turned towards the school you have chosen for your children, you began to share how you see this place—what draws you to it, what it offers, and what it asks of you in return.

This is my second home

I could sleep here—

be perfectly content

I feel completely in my element—

like a fish in water

c'est ma deuxième maison

je pourrais coucher là

je serais heureuse

je me sens comme un poisson dans l'eau

What came through most strongly in this first conversation was your sense of the school as a second home. I suspect this is why I first mistook you for a teacher—you seem to be everywhere at once. You know the colors and contours of the place, the daily comings and goings, the stories that unfold in each corner.

As I explained my research and the care I was taking with anonymity—how these questions had already been discussed with teachers—you seemed entirely untroubled by my concerns. When you spoke of the teachers, it was with such ease and warmth, as if they were your sisters, with no need for whispers or guarded truths.

In that moment, I realized the school is not merely a place you pass through; it is sewn into you, thread by thread, like a garment worn close to the skin. Or perhaps it is the other way around—you are the one stitched into its fabric, woven into its corridors, its rhythms, its stories. And what appears here is not only the mother or the parent in you, but the whole of you—the full Mia, in all her layers. I find myself wondering now: does this deep knowing—of the school’s heartbeat, of the stories your children live within its walls, of the teachers who guide and accompany them—shape how you experience your role as a co-educator? Perhaps even how you inhabit motherhood itself? I wonder if, in time, more of your stories will move towards these questions, offering glimpses of how you live in this place and how this place lives in you.

It is almost amusing how clearly the scene returns to me as I transcribe your words. I can see it all again with startling precision: you are sitting across from me, the couple beside us quietly sharing their morning—one reading the newspaper, the other sipping coffee—folded into what seemed like their long-established ritual. The restaurant hummed with its usual morning rhythm. Outside, clusters of high school students gathered, waiting for their orders, barred from lingering indoors because their sheer number unsettles the regulars.

You were telling me about your morning at the school, and I remember feeling completely drawn into the world you were opening for me. There was something about your presence—your willingness to give, to unfold your stories piece by piece—that held me. I kept wondering to myself: *Who are you? Where do you come from?* Before I could voice those questions, you seemed to sense them. You decided—without hesitation—that it mattered to tell your whole story, not just fragments. You left nothing behind.

Growing up

in Sainte-Sophie, in the Laurentians.

Somewhere between Terrebonne and Saint-Jérôme,

We had 40,000 square feet of land,

and not many neighbours.

Just a lot of trees.

I was a suburb kid.

My parents have always been together.

//

We experienced a family tragedy—which I can share with you

//

I had what I would call a truly beautiful childhood.

My father was very present.

He was the one who took us skating, tobogganing.

My mother, on the other hand, worked a lot.

She worked at Mirabel Airport, in departures.

She was the one who would search you at security—she was *that* person.

//

At some point in my adolescence, I started having doubts.

I was playing soccer back then.

My brother started playing too.

One of his friend's moms...

She got close to my dad.

My father ended up having an affair with her—for four years.

That's when everything broke.

That's when our family fell apart.

//

Before that, it really was a beautiful childhood.

My mother got through it.

It was not easy.

I was incredibly close to my father,

//

but during my teen years,

everything exploded.

I pulled away from him.

in short... that's what it was.

In response to this story now, at my desk, transcribing:

Thank you for sharing this story with me,

for trusting me to hold on to it.

I do not yet know how it fits within this research puzzle,

I do know though that I felt its importance.

Retelling it matters.

The pieces will find their place—

and that is the beauty of it:

to witness the pieces of the puzzle

coming together—

as a whole.

I wonder what the picture will hold.

Growing up *continued*

When I was young,

school

was rows of desks,

a line of silence,

more desks, all in order.

You listened to the little teacher,

and you didn't speak.

In the hallways,

you weren't allowed to talk.

We didn't even want to.

And the classroom next door—

we never saw it.

After you shared fragments of your childhood, stories of yourself as a little girl in the hallways and classrooms of your own schooling, I asked why you and your partner, Philippe, chose to send your children to an alternative school. Neither of you had ever attended one yourselves. You paused before answering, and the pause stayed with me.

You and I share that instinct to speak as thoughts arrive, unfiltered, so the silence felt deliberate, almost tender. It was as though you were reaching for the word that could hold the fullness of what this choice meant to you. Then you said it: *liberté*. You pointed to my research journal, signalling that this word mattered, that I should write it down. *Freedom*. Freedom for your children to learn, to grow, to try and err, to choose and become. Yet even as you alluded this freedom for them, I felt that this word exceeded them; it echoed through your own stories,

your own longing. *Liberté* was not only what you wanted to offer your children; it was something that had been offered to you.

You told me how you first heard about the school. Another mother, someone whose child was already enrolled in an alternative program, had watched you parent, had witnessed something in you, and suggested that you might “fit” in this world. What began as a possibility for your children became, I felt in your tone, a possibility for you.

By the end of our conversation, I shared how striking I found the comment, that you would “fit” in such a school. Schools are designed for children, we remind ourselves.

Mia: I should rephrase that. It is not that *all* children fit, but the majority of children do fit in the alternative system. But really, it is the parent who needs to fit for the child to be integrated. If a parent does not want to get involved—if they’re not motivated, if they don’t want to pull their child out of the classroom, follow their child’s interests—you just can’t be there. You can’t be in that kind of environment. The parent has to be at least somewhat motivated and believe in their child’s abilities. Everything starts with the child’s motivation. My son, for example, loves Legos. So we start with Legos and build something from there. We can do math, we can do French, we can do just about anything.

It grows from there...you can even make art from it.

As you shared this, I remember feeling a mix of uncertainty and inner conflict. I started to wonder about the kinds of parents who are drawn to or recruited into these schools. *Do they all fit this certain unspoken mold? What happens to those whose motivation, or interest, or participation, fades over time, shaped by perhaps the realities of life? And what are the consequences, not just for the parents, but for their children? What happens to their stories, both in school and beyond?*

I travel backwards to something you shared with me. You were asked by the teachers from another group—the only group your children are not currently part of—to take on the classroom projects for a family who leaves each year from January to April, as the parents work abroad during that time. While you agreed to step in and replace them, it seemed clear to me that you disagreed with the school’s decision to allow such an arrangement.

Mia: If I miss the project for some reason... I would feel so bad about it. The teachers would tell me ‘You really have to find someone to take your place. You need to find a replacement. The others can’t do it.’ And with the others, it’s accepted—it’s just one of

the challenges that come with it. But to me, it doesn't feel fair. It shouldn't be accepted. If you're in, you're in. You commit. If you want no constraints, go to a regular school. You can pull your kid out whenever you want. But here, you're involved. I just couldn't do it, personally, I couldn't say that I chose an alternative school for my children, knowing it requires commitment, and then not follow through. That's why I chose this school. To commit.

Over the past year, so many individuals I have met share a common narrative: alternative schools cannot function without parents. Behind all these alternative schools in Québec, each one of them begins with a group of parents who first envision the school, navigate the ministry processes, establish its foundations, and help run it—working in collaboration with the administration and staff. However, when parents are not meaningfully engaged, the school begins to resemble to a regular one, losing much of what sets it apart.

Mia: My friends are blown away... We have a key fob to get into the school. I see the teachers every day. I can see them four times a day if I want to. In a regular school, my friend told me, *'My kid is behind glass in the after-school program.'* Another friend told me she's asked to wait on the other side of the door. And she's standing there, watching her child fall apart, crying because he can't put his shoes on or he's looking for his mitten, and she can't even go in to help him. There is another one, her child is being bullied, and it takes three weeks just to get a meeting with the teacher. I couldn't do it. This—this is what happens in other schools...

Can you imagine...

Me, I'm anxious. I'm protective.

I'm a mama wolf.

Very, very, very present.

While these schools maintain varying entrance requirements, they share a fundamental expectation: active parental involvement. They seek parents who genuinely embrace this educational philosophy and understand that choosing such a school makes them pioneers—not only in their own child's education but in shaping the learning environment for all students within the community. Most if not all of these schools, including Mockingbird, have implemented interview processes that focus exclusively on the parents rather than the children. These interviews assess whether families align with the school's values and can contribute

meaningfully to its educational community, rather than evaluating whether a child suits the pedagogical approach.

To me, Mia, I find this process so curious... I really do wonder how the school chooses a family over another for example. I hope we could talk about this in time.

Becoming a Parent

After the birth of your first child, Maverick, you and Philippe made the decision that you would stay home with him. You took a break from your work as a childcare educator—a decision that, for you, seemed natural and clear: *“I will care for my own children before caring for the children of others”*. Soon after Maverick arrived, you were pregnant again—with your second child, then your third not long after, and finally, your fourth. While raising them, you were also supporting other mothers—offering help, guidance, and care to those struggling with breastfeeding. You held space for them in a way that only someone who had lived through it could.

Mia: I was tandem nursing. One would touch the other. It just felt natural. But now, starting again, I don’t even understand how I did it. I was so focused. By six months in, I was already going to clinics...the woman who had given me my prenatal classes—she now trains nurses at the hospital, she’s a leader in the IBCLC—told me, “Mia, I want you to be a breastfeeding mentor.” And that’s how it all began. I had both my babies, I was breastfeeding them at the same time—one alongside the other... And then, when I was tandem nursing, I could support other moms—those with twins, or those like me, with a toddler and a newborn.

It is really beautiful how you have shaped your life so fully around your children. For a long time, my own mother, the person we, as children, so often look to as our first model of who and how to be, did the same for my brother, my sister, and me. She made our lives her own. She did everything within her power to give us the best childhood she could imagine. Now, as I grow into motherhood myself, I find myself wondering how I am shaping my life alongside my children.

I reminiscence to certain moments in my teenage years, when I sensed my mother feeling a little lost. As we grew more independent, needing her less often, I could see the quiet shift—her purpose, so long tied to our needs, beginning to waver. As you spoke, I found myself thinking of her, of all that she gave, of all that she may have set aside. I wonder now about the

parts of her that might have been lost along the way, the parts of her identity that existed beyond motherhood. What dreams, what stories, remained quietly tucked away? And so, I return to you, to your story. I want to ask: *What are the stories you carry that live outside of being a mother? Which ones remain strong, still burning quietly within you? Where are these stories imagined?*

Mia in School Projects

During our conversation, I explained to you that there is another alternative school on the island of Montréal that I am growing very fond of. I visited this school during one of the RÉPAQ's events, where they organized an entire day of activities at that particular school. I shared with you how parents had a different place in that school compared to Mockingbird. I feel that it is important to go back to what we said in the conversation.

Melissa: So at this school, it's about the parent. For example, let's say I, the parent, am interested in museums. At the end of my workshop, at the end of my weeks, I'd like to take the kids to the museum. It becomes an outing, let's say. Then, the projects are assigned randomly. But your own child might not be in your group. It's not necessarily your child's project. It's yours. It's the parents' project let's say drawing... So the parents... OK, it's kind of like Mockingbird: I'm interested in doing this project, and then it's assigned randomly. But you don't necessarily have your own child.

Mia: But isn't it strange not to have your child?

Melissa: One of the things I find really interesting when I asked them a question around that is that they said something like: well, if it's something I'm able to do, for example, I'm really interested in museums. My kids already know about them. They've already learned it through me. So why not give the other kids the opportunity to learn about them...learn something that their own parents would not necessarily do with them... you see?

Mia: Yes, but your kids can learn too, even though they know a bit about it already from you, right? They can also share what they know with their friends [...] but it's a beautiful moment with your own kids in the project, even though those are often the hardest. When my kids are involved, sometimes—and it hasn't happened too often with me—but from what I've observed... I've done a full cycle. We've been at Mockingbird for eight years now. What I've seen is that kids often have meltdowns during projects. They resist. It's happened with my kids too. What I notice is that when the parent is present... Let's say a

child is caught between a rock and a hard place “*entre l’arbre et l’écorce*”—if the parent isn’t there, they get through it. But when the parent is there, it’s hard to share your mom or dad. You have to share them with other kids. So sometimes, there are outbursts. Sometimes, the parent has to take their child out of the project. Even I’ve had to do that with my daughter...

Melissa: Hm. It’s so interesting...At the other alternative school, kids see their parent at school, right? But they’re there for the others. This is how they experience the community. So for example, my dad is going to share his passion with someone else. In my mind, sure there must be some meltdowns. But there’s also something even deeper going on, you know what I mean?

Mia: Here, at Mockingbird, it’s not always your own passion as a parent. My son asked me to do a sewing project. I don’t even know how to sew on a button. So, it really pushes me out of my comfort zone. A lot of times, it’s the children who bring something to me. Like, there are these little kindergartners who’ll say, “I know how, I’ll show you.” And I’m still learning. I still mess up in my projects. It’s not always smooth and beautiful. Sometimes the experiment we wanted to do is a total flop. They wanted to make slime. It didn’t work. I was so motivated to try something. Another project, we’re going to do this. Let’s say we wanted to go observe bugs outside. But they don’t want to. They don’t want to participate. So what do you do now? What do you do with your group? OK, well, let’s go to the library and borrow some books about insects. You really have to think on your feet to bring the group back around.

I included this part of the conversation to highlight how deeply your involvement in the school is rooted in your commitment to your own children. By actively participating in their projects and learning alongside them, you are creating meaningful moments that strengthen your family connections. You also acknowledge the challenges some children, yours included, face in sharing their parents’ attention with others, yet you recognize the profound value in these experiences. Even this brief excerpt into the conversation reveals so much about the complexity and sacrifices you make on a daily basis as a mother within this school community.

I asked you what kind of parent you believed yourself to be at school—and what kind of parent you aspired to be. I remember asking you this right after quickly jotting something down in my notebook. You had noticed, and I sensed your curiosity about what I was writing. Just so you know, I very rarely write anything during a

Chaque Parent est unique

conversation. But sometimes, when a thought will not leave me alone—when it keeps circling in my mind—I need to put it down on paper so I can return fully to listening. That moment was one of those times.

Mia: Each parent is unique. Each parent is unique. What this means is that there are parents who arrive in January—let's say, when it's time for a new project block with a new group of children. Some come prepared from A to Z, ready to say, "Here are our eight sessions. What are we going to do?"

I'll tell you that I'm half-and-half, and I really try to leave plenty of room. I'm someone who likes to be in control in life, who is prepared with four children. I decide everything, I do everything at home, you know. I'm the one in charge of everything at home. I have no choice.

So when it comes to projects, I really try to remind myself each time I go to school to give the children space. More *liberté*. It's their project.

Because at first, I was prepared. I could know what I was going to do from week 1 to week 8. "Okay, we're going to do the sky theme." First, we'll do an experiment about the sky. Second, we'll make a painting about the sky. Third, we'll do a construction project about it. It was detailed down to the last detail. So there I was, arriving like that.

But more and more,

we learn,

we gain experience.

We arrive with, for example, "Okay, mom, I'm really motivated about this. For the sky theme, I want to talk about rainbows and make a model." We present that when we have our first meeting. It's also happened that we say, "Well, okay, in the end it won't be a model, but we'll paint or do a paint-by-number." But we try to talk a bit about

⊕parents learn through
time at this
school how
to live
alongside their
children⊕
(Jan, 2020)

what motivated her. Then, what else can we do? We'll make a mobile to put in our room. Okay, from there, "Yes, we'll write a letter, I don't know, to Nature. We'll mail it to an organization like a nature protection group that works on protection." You understand? It can go really broad. Sky—you can do lots of things with that. It's not just talking about the sky; it can be nature, it can be the environment, it can extend to—we can even do field trips. That's just one example.

From what you shared with me during our first conversation, it is evident that with four children, you must be exceptionally organized—and as you said yourself, it is not really a choice, but a necessity. Yet, when it comes to school project, you spoke of intentionally setting aside that “mother-in-control” identity you carry at home, allowing your child the space to take ownership—because it is their project, not yours.

In this first conversation, there were a few times you alluded to valuing the uniqueness of each parent’s way of being at the school.

Mia: You know, here I can be who I am, and you can take the place you want. Some parents come in with these beautifully organized projects, and others are quieter, more spontaneous... but everyone gets to be who they are. And that, well—that’s something special.

I have started to notice this myself. Even in the brief conversations I have had with teachers, there is a clear ethos—an intentional stepping back, this kind of refusal to take control of projects. During projects, it seems there is a shared commitment to enabling parents the freedom to bring themselves in whatever way feels right. Perhaps that is why I am not able to find any formal set of guidelines for parents—because what matters most is not this value to conformity but really diversity and authenticity...

This letter could go on and on, but I will offer a pause here. I am truly looking forward to our second conversation. It is already on the calendar—so I will see you soon.

Sincerely,
Melissa

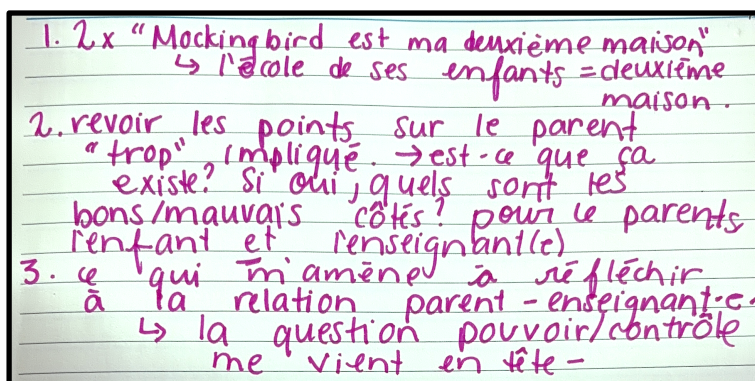
April 14, 2025

Dear Mia,

I hope you had a restful weekend.

Last Friday, we met for our second official research conversation. As I mentioned, this is a particularly busy period for me. I am taking on a short teaching contract at another alternative school while continuing to gather field texts for my dissertation, all while running on very little sleep—my son Louis is now navigating his fifteenth ear infection since birth. Despite the pace of things, it felt grounding to spend that time with you. We had planned for an hour together, and we nearly managed it.

Once back in my car, rushing to my mother's house to pick up Sam and Louis, I quickly jotted down three reflections from our conversation—three things that stayed with me and that I want to share with you.¹ The first



reflection concerns the different times when you spoke of the school as a second home. You mentioned this in our initial conversation as well, and I referenced it in the opening lines of the last letter I wrote to you. Each time you say it, it unsettles me in ways I have not yet fully understood. Your words evoke a mixture of emotions—complex, layered—and I am still unsure what lies beneath them.

You speak of the school with such ease, as though it is entirely self-evident that this space has become your second family: "If there's one thing to remember, Mockingbird is my second family. If something happens, if I'm not doing well, that's where I go. It's my second home—it's where I feel my best". As I sit with the feelings your stories stir in me—your sense of belonging, your forging of a second home—I cannot help but wonder about your children. Do

¹ Translated field texts: 1. Twice Mia says: "Mockingbird is my second home" → Her children's school = her second home/house; 2. Look through the conversation when we talk about the parent being "too implicated/engaged". I wonder, does this parent exist? If so, what are the good/bad sides? For the parent, the children, and the teacher; and 3. This leads me thinking about the teacher-parent relationship. My wonder about power/control comes to mind.

they feel this same rootedness? Perhaps they do, in part because they see you inhabiting this place so fully, moving through its halls not only as a parent but as someone who belongs.

Mia: My kids are different at home than they are at school. At school, they're really focused on their own thing. But at home—things explode. They let go; they decompress. And honestly, I'd rather they explode at home than at school. At school, I want them to hold it together.

Melissa: Why?

Mia: Because it's hard having someone else manage your child when they're having a meltdown. It's not easy for them. I'd much rather they lose it with me.

Listening back to this part of our exchange, I found myself wondering: when you said, "*it's not easy for them*," who were you thinking of? Your children? The teachers? Or maybe even the other parents? You shared a story a little later in our conversation about your youngest, Darius when he started kindergarten.

Mia: At the beginning of the year, and still sometimes these days, Darius has meltdowns. I was there, and [the teacher] was there too. Sometimes, I had to leave. I was asked to say goodbye even though I wanted to stay, but [the teacher] would take over. You know, one day [the teacher] said to me, "When you leave the classroom, just go. Don't stick around." I used to go see the other groups, like the kindergarten is right next door to other classrooms so I would do my little tour around the school. I'd go chat with the girls [the teachers in the other groups]. They're my friends, you know? Then Darius would see me again and start all over. So [the kindergarten teacher] said, "When you leave, really leave". And I started doing that. But it's really hard... you know?

In this story, you described how difficult it was for Darius to be in the classroom without you—how he struggled to separate, clinging to your presence. It was the teacher who ultimately told you that you needed to step out, and this moment brought me back to the second point in my field text notes: your concerns about being perceived as an "over-implicated".

Lately, we have been seeing each other more often because we are both at the school very often. I have begun to pay closer attention to how you interact with the teachers. On one hand, I sense a profound affection and care—a genuine closeness. On the other hand, and this became clear now that we had our second conversation, I sensed a kind of trepidation. It seems to surface

around the authority teachers hold in your children's lives—as though their decisions, or even their position as decision-makers, does not always sit entirely comfortably with you.

Mia: Because at lunchtime, I used to keep him with me. We do turns between all three of them. The oldest does not want to have lunch with us anymore... but you know, I'm here, I am already at school, I want to spend time with my kids. I don't mind if Darius stays with me after lunch, you know? [The teacher] would say, "Darius, you need to go outside and play with the other kids to get used to it". Eight hours is a long time for a little one. Okay, I get why she does that. I still find her too... I find she has a lot of principles that are a bit old-fashioned, you know?

Listening to your voice in my earphones—describing your weekly lunches at the school, your interactions with teachers outside regular hours, your ongoing communication with them, and your friendships—I am becoming increasingly aware of what this school represents for you. It is a layered and intimate space. Your description of it as a second home or second family is not metaphorical; it reflects the depth of your involvement and the degree to which you have become part of its daily life. In many ways, this is a place where your parenting continues—not from a distance, but from within the everyday life of the school.

In the margins of the printed transcript of this second conversation, I wrote:

As if no line was ever drawn—
 between home and school,
 teachers and friends,
 families and kin.
 School becomes home.
 Home becomes school.

Questions about the boundary between school and more private spheres—such as one's home—continue to surface across our time together.

When I reflect on this, I am struck by how unfamiliar your experience feels to me. For as long as I can remember, there has been a clear line between myself and teachers, and more broadly, between myself and the school as an institution. That boundary felt natural, even necessary. But the way you move across that line—the way you inhabit the school as though it were an extension of your home—has stayed with me. It prompts me to ask: why was that boundary there in the first place? Who drew it? Who taught us that home and school, parent and

teacher, [researcher and participant] should remain distinct? And what happens when that line blurs? What possibilities arise when relationships are not constrained by roles, when care is enacted in shared spaces rather than mediated by institutional distance? Your way of being unsettles my assumptions. It makes me wonder what is lost when we keep these worlds separate—and what might be gained when we allow them to meet.

I find myself returning to some of the literature I encountered while drafting my review—especially the texts that invoked the figure of the “overly implicated parent”. At the time, I paused at that phrase, unsure of what it truly meant or how it manifested in everyday school life. But hearing your stories—your reasons, your desires, your unwavering presence—I began to see that label differently than it was portrayed in research.

From what I understand, you chose this school not only for its pedagogical philosophy but because it created the conditions for you to show up: to be involved, to witness, to remain close to your children’s daily worlds. You chose it so you could continue being an engaged parent. And perhaps what some might hastily name “over-involvement” becomes, in this context, something else entirely—a form of care, of vigilance, of love made visible. It raises a question for me: who gets to decide when a parent is “too much”? And what does that reveal about the kinds of relationships we imagine—or constrain—between families and schools?

Mia: Yes, learning with projects, but it was also because I wanted to be engaged. I wanted to know what they were doing in a day, the teachers, I have a key, the accessibility. You know, just thinking about bullying. Everything I hear around bullying. I wanted to be there for them, to see them. You know, they stayed with me from the day they were born until they started school. I cannot imagine a clean cut, eight hours away, bye. It’s impossible.

I find myself wanting to ask: *who* does this engagement ultimately serve? At times, it feels as though this school creates the conditions for you to continue mothering your children in ways that resonate with your values, your hopes, and your sense of who they are—and who they might become.

And yet, I return to the story you told about Darius and how difficult it is for him to be in the classroom without you nearby. I find myself wondering how he would tell that story. What narratives might your children offer—about school, about learning, about the adults who accompany them? How would they describe your presence in their days? What kind of character

would you become in their accounts—a guide, a protector, a disruption, or something else entirely? What space would you occupy in their stories, and how would others move around you, with you, or because of you?

Hm. Let's ponder on those questions a little longer.

Talk soon,

Melissa

April 22, 2025

Dear Mia,

I hope you are well.

I am writing this note from the little café where we held our second “official” research conversation. I ordered the brownie again—thank you once more for the suggestion.

I returned to this café today because I have been struggling to begin writing your narrative account. I cannot quite picture how it will take shape—how the stories you have shared will appear on the page, which ones will be retold, which ones will be held back for now. There is so much I want to honour in writing, and yet the blank page never seems large enough to contain the fullness of your experiences. Even though our next conversation is already scheduled—exactly one week from today—I do not feel ready. I think I need more time to sit with what you have entrusted to me.

And yet, if I postpone our meeting, I worry you may feel as though I am letting you down. So, I keep listening. I return to the recordings of our conversations, to the transcripts, to the notes I wrote while we were together at the school—during project periods, in hallways, alongside your children and their teachers. There are so many moments that feel significant, moments that deserve to be remembered and carefully retold. But I also know they cannot all be held within this single document—this modest file, typed in black Times New Roman, size 12, bearing only the date: *April 22, 2025*.

As I attempt to retell the stories you have shared about mothering in this school, something else continues to press at the edges of my thinking: the relationship we have been building. What began within the formal frame of research has unfolded into something more tender, more human—a friendship. I think we both sensed this from the outset.

I know how curious you are about the research itself, and I have spoken a little about the methodology guiding this study—narrative inquiry as a relational methodology. You were the first to remark that, as I described it, it sounded as though I was intentionally seeking to build friendships. Your observation stayed with me, not because it was untrue, but because it revealed something about how you were already reading our relationship. I am still unsure how to write about this—about the stories we are not only gathering but living alongside one another. In this uncertainty, I find myself returning to Hannah Arendt. In 1968, she wrote that “friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (p. 25).

This line stays with me; it troubles and moves me in equal measure. It prompts me to wonder what it means for us to be in relationship through this work. What does it mean that something so intimate also bears public—even political—weight? I will return to Arendt, and I hope we can think with her together—about what we have created, and what we are still creating, in the in-between spaces¹ of school and research, friendship and inquiry, self and other, story and world.

With care,

Melissa

¹ Notation written on April 29, 2025.

We had planned to return to the café for our next conversation this morning, but you called yesterday to let me know that one of your children was sick and we would need to reschedule. In the end, it worked out well, as another research participant had invited me to spend the morning alongside them at the school.

I still saw you briefly today. I was genuinely happy to see you, even for just a few minutes before I had to leave. I am not entirely sure why, but that brief exchange has stayed with me all day.

After spending the morning with the other participant, I decided to return once more to our café. I had forgotten what I wrote here last week, so I reread the letter I drafted for you. Then I put in my earphones, set my notifications to “do not disturb,” and began writing what was on my mind.

the in-between
 The schoolyard hugs.
 The silences
 after you've dropped your kids
 in the school yard.
 The unplanned phone calls,
 the birthday messages.
 The voice recordings—
 little ones spilling through.
 I say to them:
Chip.
Chocolat.
Gomme.
 Your daughter answers:
Peanut—
 with a blink of pride.
 What do we do with these field texts?
 The living of the research—
 not only in the planned conversations;
 in the way the relationship
 is being made,
 already in the making,
 evolving,
 unfolding—
the in-between.
 The spaces outside—
 the recorded,
 the scripted,
 the prescribed.
 What happens to the unscripted
 moments of a participant–researcher relationship?
 The invisible stories woven into dialogue.
 The wonder—not of the data;
 of the connection, of the world.
 What is lived in the in-between
 of living,
 of the telling and retelling?—
 what about the *reliving*?
 I wonder—
 who is the reliving for?
 What is it made of?
 The experience?
 The pause between words?
 What *if*—the puzzle
 is not the experience itself—
 but what surrounds the relationship.
 The laughter.
 The silence.
 Something like friendship
 growing in the margins—
 isn't this, too,
 the story?
To be—
 told
 lived
 retold
 relived.
 the in-between

May 1, 2025

Dear Mia and Philippe,

I wanted to thank you both for the truly wonderful day I spent with you and your children.

We began with Darius's project: making *pâte à sel*—for the first time in my life. I met (more formally—I already knew who he was) Philippe outside the kindergarten classroom to gather the children. Once we arrived downstairs to the kitchen, everything was already in place. That was where you were, Mia. You once told me you liked to come prepared for projects; now I fully understand what you meant.

The kitchen smelled of chicken soup—the same scent that used to greet me when I came home from school as a child: carrots, celery, onion, garlic, an entire chicken simmering for hours, and noodles added only at the end. Stepping into that room with the kids and with Philippe felt like stepping back into that warmth. I caught myself wondering if that smell was a familiar presence in this kitchen too.

The children gathered at the table by the windows, sitting on stools around a rectangular metal table. All six of them. You both explained the plan for the day—how this activity was part of a multi-week theme called *Pâtes*, where they would explore different recipes and textures.

It unfolded beautifully.

We gave the kids flour, salt, water, and an eclectic assortment of cookie cutters: animals, shapes, little objects they recognized immediately.

I was struck by how organized and well-equipped the kitchen was. I had never seen an elementary school with a space like that. The children moved around it with ease, as if it were an extension of their everyday world—they even knew where things were stored. I felt genuinely happy during that hour. Although I probably should have been paying closer attention to the two of you—how you moved, how you coordinated—I found myself instead swept into the activity, connecting with the children, especially your son, who was so proud of what he had made.

Philippe and I worked together to find the right flour–salt–water ratio so the children could mix their own dough and shape their small sculptures. You placed the trays in the oven, Mia, and we checked on them periodically. Afterwards, we cleaned the kitchen, returned everything to its place, and brought the children back to class just in time for lunch. We then joined Everlee and her friends in the cafeteria. You mentioned, Mia, that it was her turn—how each week one of your children gets to share a lunch with both of you.

Once the children went outside to play, Philippe suggested that we take the opportunity to record a conversation, and so we did.

I found it fascinating to hear your reflections, Philippe, on your place within the school as well. When I asked you why you had chosen this school, your narrative echoed Mia in many meaningful ways.

Philippe: It's great—you get to see the kids. It all goes by so fast, you know? When you think about it, they're gone for seven, eight hours a day. We don't see them—from the moment they start school until they're adults, that's time we don't get back. Here, we have the chance to be with them—so why not? It's not just about the educational side; *it's emotional, personal, and about family too.*

I was struck by the clarity and tenderness of this reflection. Both of you have chosen to live alongside your children in multiple spaces—home, school, project periods, lunchtime—in ways that blur the conventional boundaries between family life and schooling. Rather than remaining on the periphery, you position yourselves as active participants in the unfolding educational stories of your children and their peers. This is not merely involvement; it is a deeply relational orientation to learning, one that intertwines parents into the everyday fabric of school life.

Philippe: At some point, I realized that when kids have to choose a project, it's not really the project they're picking. They choose the parent they've been able to build a connection with. Sometimes, they don't even care about the project theme. I could show up with any project... anything at all. They'd go for it just because we're there—because it's going to be fun simply because of that connection.

Philippe, your insight highlights something fundamental: that children's learning is shaped not only by curricular content but also, and perhaps more profoundly, by the relationships that animate their daily experiences. This school intentionally creates conditions where students interact with a wide range of adults and peers, forming relationships that support growth, belonging, and meaningful engagement. In this context, learning becomes an encounter—one sustained through presence, connection, and shared participation.

Unfortunately, I have to stop here, even though there is so much more I want to write to both of you. I need to get to bed—the “Louis 5 o'clock alarm” will come quickly if I do not. I

hope to return to these thoughts soon. Thank you again for such a wonderful day.

Warmly,

Melissa

May 6, 2025

Dear Mia and Philippe,

Attached, you will find an excerpt from our conversation that I would very much like to share with both of you. I hope it can help us continue the discussion in our next conversation.

Melissa: You're both parents who are extremely involved—way beyond what's expected, right?

Mia: Not really, because he only comes on Thursdays now. Before, he worked from home. When he was working remotely, he used to come almost every day. He'd drop them off, pick them up—he was around way more than he is now. It's kind of sad. The kids will often ask me, "Is today Daddy's day?" It's sad...

Melissa: But let's be real—is it really sad? Their dad is still way more present than a lot of dads...

Philippe: It's just that they remember it. They had the time before COVID, when only our oldest, Maverick, was in school. Back then, I was working from home, so I was there all the time—we saw each other constantly, we bonded even more. Then things eased up, and now it's like—back to normal.

Mia: It's Darius who won't have as much of Dad at school. Maverick got a lot of that... but yeah, It's kind of crazy. I'm there almost every day. Some people even say to me, "Mia, maybe take a step back." Others are like, "Why don't you just work at the school if you're going to be there all the time?" Even the kids ask, "Mia, what's your job at school? What do you do?" And I tell them—it's volunteer work.

Philippe: Like I said earlier—she's there because she loves it. And she's lucky to have the chance to do it.

Melissa: But really, it is more of a choice you've both made. Right?

Mia: There's never a teacher at Mockingbird who made me feel like... "Okay, now's not the time to be here, not the time to talk." I mean, it's happened once or twice—but very rarely. We're lucky to have this opportunity. But yeah, some people think... "You're kind of over the top." I hear that a lot. But honestly, it makes me feel valued. The kids feel good with me, and I feel good with them. I've built connections with so many of the kids at the school—so many. And it brings me real joy. Do you think I'm too intense?

Reflections to what you just said: Mia, I find myself pausing at your question. Am I too intense? Who am I to hold the scale against which such a thing could be measured? Too intense... compared to what? Or to whom? When I hear the word intense, my thoughts drift towards the language of art—however limited my knowledge may be. In color theory, intensity speaks to purity—its brightness, its power. A color at full intensity is radiant, alive, impossible to ignore. A less intense hue is softer, quieter, subdued. If I could answer you now, I think I would say this: You are learning, with great care, how to play with intensity—how to turn the dial, not to disappear, but to deepen your expression. Like an artist blending pigments, you are exploring how vibrancy and quiet coexist on the same canvas. And in that exploration, Mia, you are already creating something beautiful.

Philippe: Why not? We're having fun.

Mia: This is our second family. Mockingbird is our second family. So, when we have free time or they're looking for someone to help, we show up.

I will talk to both of you later,
Melissa



Visual Field Text 9

Photograph taken during a sprint
along *le fleuve Saint-Laurent*,
wondering how colours come into relation
through their pigments.

May 7, 2025

Dear Mia,

I hope you slept well last night.

We spent another day alongside each other at school yesterday.

During Devin's project, I had texted Fred, my husband, something that I noticed and did not want to forget. Why did I text Fred you are probably asking yourself? Good question.

Because my notebook was in the other room, and I really did not want the thought to slip away. Fred and I do this sometimes: he messages me when he does not want to lose an idea for the novel he is working on; I usually text him things we need to buy at groceries(— with appropriate coupons). However, I had messaged him a small fragment of an exchange you and Philippe had.

Mia: On ne sera pas prêts à présenter notre jeu la semaine prochaine; je vais essayer de changer la date pour dans trois semaines. / ("We won't be ready to present our game next week; I'll try to move it to three weeks from now.")

Philippe: Oui, on ne va pas avoir une bonne note si on présente la semaine prochaine. / "Yeah, we won't get a good grade if we present next week."

What struck me was how naturally you both slipped into "we", as though the project belonged to you, even though in our conversations you speak with such clarity about these being your children's projects. It made me think about how deeply we, as parents, want to remain close to our children's stories—how we try to shape them, soften them, steer them in ways that feel right. It reminded me of something from last night, a moment with my daughter Sam. This is how it all came out:

It was late last night.

I was lying in bed with Sam,
still humming with the day I had spent with you,
at school.

Il était tard.

J'étais allongée dans mon lit avec Sam,
je vibraais encore de la journée passée avec toi,
à l'école.

She turned to me,
her voice, small and serious:

Elle s'est tournée vers moi,
sa voix petite et sérieuse :

“Why are you still in school?
 Aren’t you too old?”
 And then,
 without pause:
 “Mommy, I want to go to school too.
 Like you.
 You’ll be small,
 I’ll be tall.
 We could switch.
 I already love school.
 I could have a lunchbox every day”.

There she was,
 curled into the space her father usually sleeps,
 dreaming aloud
 of becoming a doctor—
 though I am not sure she knows what that means.
 Maybe just that it’s someone.
 That matters.

Yet, in that moment,
 I felt a flicker—
 the tiniest spark of what might be called
 success.
 relief.
 a stillness in my chest.

I thought of my mother,
 raising the three of us.
 Driving us across long roads,
 windows open,

« Maman, pourquoi t’es encore à l’école ?
 T’es pas trop vieille ? »
 Ensuite,
 sans attendre :
 « Maman, moi aussi je veux aller à l’école.
 Comme toi.
 Toi, tu seras petite,
 moi je serai grande.
 On pourrait échanger.
 J’aime déjà l’école.
 J’aurai une boîte à lunch chaque jour. »

Elle était là,
 blottie dans la place où dort habituellement son père,
 rêvant tout haut
 de devenir docteur—
 je doute qu’elle sache ce que c’est.
 Peut-être juste que c’est quelqu’un.
 Qui compte.

Et pourtant, dans ce moment-là,
 j’ai senti une étincelle—
 la plus petite lueur—
 la réussite.
 Un soulagement.
 Une paix dans mon cœur.

J’ai pensé à ma mère,
 nous conduisant
 sur de longues routes,
 fenêtres ouvertes,

country music high—
 Kenny Chesney, maybe Keith Urban—
 eyes locked on something far off.

“There’s one thing no one can ever take from
 you,” she would say.

“Your education.”

A mantra in motion.
 Ashamed of her tears,
 yet never of her truth.

and maybe because of that—
 because of her—
 I have always tried to carve a space in school
 that could be mine.
 A space to belong.
 to keep going.
 to matter just enough.

I share this with you
 not to compare,
 but to say—
 I see you.

I understand the weight,
 the urgency,
 the quiet ache we carry as mothers,
 as parents,
 to offer our children
 not just any path—
 but the best one.

musique country à fond—
 Kenny Chesney, peut-être Keith Urban—
 les yeux rivés au loin.

« Il y a une chose qu’on ne pourra jamais t’enlever »,
 elle disait.

« Ton éducation. »

Un mantra.
 Honteuse de ses larmes,
 mais jamais de sa vérité.

Et peut-être que c’est pour ça—
 grâce à elle—
 que j’ai toujours voulu me faire une place à l’école.
 Une place à moi.
 Un endroit où appartenir.
 Continuer.
 Compter, juste assez.

Je te raconte cela
 pas pour comparer,
 mais pour te dire, Mia—
 je te vois.

Je comprends le poids,
 l’urgence,
 la douleur discrète que nous portons, comme mères,
 comme parents,
 pour offrir à nos enfants
 pas n’importe quel chemin—
 Le meilleur apprentissage.

the best learning.
the best chances.

A version of school
that fits.
that softens the hard edges.
that does not bruise too deeply.

Even when we are tired.
Even when we are unsure.
We keep building on the story—
because we know what it means.

My parents hid my learning disabilities
when I was young.
They feared the labels,
the tracking,
the slipping behind.

They wanted me to go far.
To live a good life.
To survive the fall
when life gets heavy.
Education, they believed,
was a pillow.
It still hurts—
but less.

Sam tells me she wants to be a doctor,
this radiant, shining three-year-old

Celui qui ouvre
des chemins.

Une école
qui leur ressemble.
Qui adoucit les coins tranchants.
Qui ne blesse pas trop fort.

Même quand on est fatigués.
Même en doute.
On continue d'écrire l'histoire—
parce qu'on sait ce que ça veut dire.

Mes parents ont caché mes difficultés d'apprentissage
quand j'étais petite.
Ils craignaient les étiquettes,
les classements,
les retards accumulés.

Ils voulaient que j'aille loin.
Que j'aie une belle vie.
Que je puisse survivre à la chute
quand la vie devient lourde.
L'école, croyaient-ils,
était un coussin.
Ça fait encore mal—
mais moins.

Quand Sam me dit qu'elle veut devenir docteure,
cette petite lumière de trois ans,

bursting with beginnings,
 I feel it.
 That tug.
 To clear the road for her.
 To walk beside her.
 To step into the very heart of the institution
 and shape the story with her.

To make it smoother
 than mine.

And if school stories are shaped by grades—
 if smoother stories begin with higher marks—
 then yes,
 I understand.
 You are doing exactly what I would do,
 if I had the privilege
 of being written into my daughter's
 school stories.

I will read this to you next time we meet.

With love,
 Melissa

pleine de commencements,
 je le sens.
 Ce tiraillement.
 Ce désir de lui aplanir la route.
 De marcher à ses côtés.
 D'entrer au cœur même de l'institution
 et de façonner l'histoire avec elle.

Pour qu'elle soit plus douce
 que la mienne.

Et si les histoires d'école se tracent à travers les notes—
 si une histoire plus fluide commence par de
 meilleures moyennes—alors oui,
 je comprends.
 Tu fais exactement ce que je ferais,
 si j'avais le privilège
 d'être écrite dans les histoires scolaires
 de ma fille.

May 21, 2025

Dear Mia,

You called me after your doctor's appointment—just as you said you would.

You have been feeling... not yourself.

Tired.

You say your body no longer follows your mind the way it used to.

You suspect you are in your *pre-pre-menopause*,

and while you joke about it lightly,

I hear something softer in your voice—

a lingering uncertainty,

a fatigue that lives below language.

I am worried about you.

☹️

Alongside that worry lives another weight:

this ever-present question of how to live within the contours of our relationship—

a relationship that defies the neatness of:

“researcher”

and “participant.”

As Clandinin (2023) reminds me,

narrative inquiry is not a methodology of detachment

it is a way of being in relation—

a relational inquiry that binds us together in experience through and with stories.

“Narrative inquirers begin in relationship,

live in relationship, and leave in relationship.

We do not enter or leave the lives of others

untouched

or unchanged”. (p. 43)

You have opened so many parts of your life to me—
 your stories as a mother, a daughter, a woman, a wife;
 your silences, your worries, your joys.

And in turn, I have brought parts of myself into our conversations,
 not by accident, but because the relationship called for it—
 because you wanted to know.

You wanted to know about my life—
 my children, my partner, my research, my stories,
 my ambitions, my worries, my wonders—
 in a shared space,
 in a shared story—
 in a story composed
 alongside
 one another.

I have been grappling with how to name this closeness.
 When I talk about you to others, I pause.
 I hesitate between “participant” and “friend,”
 between “co-composer” and “collaborator.”

I try to explain that the boundary is not a line but a tension,
 a shifting space between knowing and unknowing,
 between listening and being listened to—
 complexity.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) wrote:

In everyday life, the idea of friendship implies a sharing,
 an interpenetration of two or more persons’ spheres of experience.
 Mere contact is acquaintanceship,

not friendship.

The same may be said for collaborative research
which requires a close relationship akin to friendship.

Relationships are joined,
as McIntyre implies,
by the narrative unities of our lives". (p. 281)

We are not merely exchanging words.

We are interweaving our stories

I wonder:

What happens when we move from this deeply relational space
of co-composing field texts
into the solitary
and more public [and political] act of writing final research texts?

Clandinin et al. (2018) asked:

When we are no longer physically alongside participants,
how do we continue to live
relational ethics (p. 200)?

This question lingers, especially now—

as I begin to retell your story,

alone at my desk,

your voice playing softly through my earphones,
your words printed across the page.

I feel the weight of the responsibility.

Not just to represent you accurately,

but to honour you ethically.

To continue living the relationship,
akin to friendship,
even in your physical absence.

Relational ethics
in narrative inquiry
are not static.

They are lived.

They unfold in moments of uncertainty, vulnerability, and care.

There are no already-made answers,
nor do they follow specific processes or procedures
only a commitment to presence,
to humility and attentiveness
to staying with the complexity of being in relation
to living alongside one another.

As I write to you yet another letter,
I ask myself not just what parts of your story to tell,
but *how* to tell it—in a way that remains faithful to the space
between us,

To not write only about the words that have been told,
but to everything we have felt,
to explore the markings on our skin,
the smiles,
the goosebumps,
the silences,

the language we created through eye contact,
 the nods,
 the hugs that sometimes felt too short.
 How to tell it in a way that continues to hold you with care.

This relationship—ours—is teaching me
 that to inquire narratively is to live ethically in the unknown.
 I wonder...is unknown the right word?
 What is the word to define *this* experience:
 of dwelling
 in the beauty and ache
 of relational entanglement?

Writing yet another letter is my way of staying
 with you,
 of refusing
 to turn you into a “subject” on a page.

Writing to you with letters is a way for me
 to still feel you beside me,
 even here,
 even now.

I really do enjoy playing with words,
 to discover what they can carry when I let them move s l o w l y—
 with affection.

With love,
 Melissa

¹ Notation written on July 30, 2025.

Reading this letter this morning, I carried it with me as Fred and I drove with the kids, one of our road-trip albums, Village by Jacob Banks, playing softly in the hope that they might fall asleep, I became wide-awake to the emerging thread running through much of what I have been writing in your narrative account. I am drawn to the way you move between school and home, as though the boundary between the two is thin, almost permeable. This movement seems to shape not only how you experience each space, but also how you come into relation with those within them.

I find myself moving in a similar way—feeling the friction, or perhaps the complexity, of living in-between, on the line between my role as a narrative inquirer and my becoming a friend. The line between our positions, between your stories and mine, feels increasingly blurred. What opens up instead is a share space—relational and reflexive—one that we inhabit together, stories folding into one another.

Our relationship carries a certain intimacy, yet it remains held by a sense of professional and social responsibility. I notice this same complexity mirrored in how you move alongside the teachers at the school—not as someone observing from the edges.... as someone living and labouring with them, within the everyday and ordinary life of the place.

June 9, 2025, 13h45

Translated Summary of Exchanges by Text Message

Melissa: I decided to use letters to retell your story. It was the way that I found came easiest. It is also important for me to show how our relationship has evolved. What do you think of the idea?

Mia: Wow. But my story is too long. I am so touched that this is the way you found to do it. I love it. It is so intimate also. I know you want to show me glimpses of it, but I only want to read a draft that is almost close to finish.

June 19, 2025, 12h00

Dear Mia,

Are you still at school?

It is lunchtime and I decided to eat alone in the kindergarten classroom. I wanted to take a few minutes to write you a short note. I am replacing the kindergarten teacher, today, and your son Darius is in her class. This morning was his final kindergarten project. Things did not quite go as planned.

It was the second time this year the children had the idea to complete a combined project—two students working together—which naturally means double the number of parents and double the number of students involved. In your case, there were three parents present: you, Philippe, and Jean-Daniel (Nicholas' dad), working with a total of ten children—half the class. Darius and Nicholas had decided on a hide-and-seek and plush toy project.

Since I only had three students in the class this morning (there was another project happening at the same time—Leena's project on "vacations") and had someone helping in the classroom too, I decided to go observe the projects.

I saw him clutching Chase—

his Paw Patrol plush,
a soft blue anchor
in a storm he could not name.
He was not responsive.
Red hair, dusted with freckles,
growing redder by the second.
There was something
he needed—
to do,
to say.
He wanted his mother.
He wanted his daddy.
He wanted them
to himself.

This was not only his project.
 It was a shared one.
 a shared project
 with whom his parents were shared.

I felt ill-equipped.
 Should I step in?
 As his teacher?
 Should I lead him back
 to the classroom,
 gather him gently
 into something else?

should I take control?

I wondered—
 what would I want
 my daughter's teacher to do
 in this moment?

Would I feel
 a flicker of doubt,
 a question
 about my identity—
 as a mother,
 as *her* mother—
 if her teacher stepped in
 to steady the moment
 I could not?
 Is this
 part of children's growth?
 or is this part of ours?

how is their story drawn?

in pencil?
 in ink?
 in something that smudges
 or stains?

who holds the chalk,
 the brush,
 the thread?

Who is the artist?

The parent?

The child?

The teacher?

or is the artist

the space between them

shaped in dialogue,
 drawn in trust,
 coloured by care?

[pause; letter is continued after school]

Ten minutes after writing the piece above, you came to see me in the classroom. You had lunch with Darius, in the cafeteria. Nicholas' dad, Jean-Daniel, with whom you did this morning's project also had lunch with his kid. As you came in, I asked how Darius was, and I told you that I was writing about what happened this morning and how uncertain I felt in that moment. I asked you what I should have done as "the teacher" in this instance. This was your answer:

Usually,
 the teacher would have stepped in—
 it makes me question my ability as his mother.
 I knew something in him was not being met.

I know my child.
 I know him best.
 Sometimes teachers take up too much space
 in our project.
 we know what to do
 we choose this school
 because we want to take part
 in all of this
 (notes in my research journal, 2025).

This brings me back to a letter I wrote you on April 14, 2025 where I found myself wondering how you imagine your relationship with teachers in this shared space. You spoke of being a parent in the school—of knowing your child deeply, intimately—and yet, I sensed moments where that knowing met resistance, where stories bumped up against the presence or perceptions of teachers.

It made me think about the quiet tensions that can live within these relationships when a parent is not only engaged but embedded—living within the school’s rhythm. There are the duals we often name parent–teacher, parent–child, teacher–student. There are other layers: parents with other parents, teachers with each other, teachers who are also parents, children with their parents, and with others’ parents too.

How do we hold all of this together?

How do we mix it together without letting it unravel?

How do we write about the spaces where roles blur and relationships overlap—where

being known

becomes

a collective act?

in this collective act,

we begin

to see

the triad: parent, child, teacher.

we know it is more than that, though—more on that later.

In the conversation we had with Philippe in May, I remember asking him how he saw *his* relationship with the teacher.

Melissa: How do you see your relationship with the teacher?

Philippe: A relationship? I don't really have one. No. I mean, I say hello to everyone. But as for a *relationship*... no.

Mia: See, for me, I'd say I've developed more than just a basic connection. With some of the teachers, I feel close. My friends...

Philippe: Yeah, it's... yeah, they're teachers. Sure. But I wouldn't call it a *relationship*, you know? I kind of compare it to the private or public-school systems. I'm not saying I know everything, but in public schools, there's a clear hierarchy. A kind of top-down structure. Authoritative. You can't just do certain things. I'm not saying you can do everything here, but it's way easier to communicate with the teachers. It's direct. You don't need to book an appointment. You don't have to wait forever. It just happens—you show up, and there's someone ready to talk to you. They're very receptive... and respectful. So yeah, I wouldn't call it a *relationship*, but more of a *connection*.

I find Philippe's perspective deeply intriguing—so strikingly different from the strong, enduring relationships you have cultivated with teachers over time. For him, it is the ease of access he values—the comfort of being able to speak with a teacher at any moment, should something arise at school.

It reminds me of a story you once shared—a discomfiting one. A mother from the school had invited every child in her daughter's class to a summer birthday party, except your son. You turned to the teachers, hoping they might mediate, as the situation had grown tense and confrontational. I remember you confiding in me how one teacher, rather than offering support, said: « C'est trop des parents impliqués comme vous autres. Trop, c'est comme pas assez » / “*It's too much—parents like you make 'too much' feel like not enough.*” As if, in that moment, your care had overstepped an invisible boundary, breaching the supposed line between home and school. I remember how deeply that comment saddened you—and rightly so. I would have felt the same. There is a certain loneliness in being made to feel that one's devotion is too much. Yet, that was the only story you remembered feeling this way.

In writing this letter to you, I find myself returning—again and again—to the relationships that unfold between parents and teachers [and researcher and participant]. There is

something in these connections that continues to stir my curiosity. I am drawn to wondering about the space parents are invited to hold in this particular space, and how that space intertwines, or perhaps collides, with the stories we already carry. It remains something I do not yet fully understand—something still unfolding in the shadows of the ordinary everyday.

To be continued...

Melissa

June 30, 2025

Happy Birthday, Dear Mia!

The last year before your forties!

To mark your birthday, I invited you for ice cream. As always, you agreed without hesitation, and we met one evening last week—after supper, once my children were asleep. It was the first week of summer break, and all four of your children were preparing to spend the months ahead with you. Your mother-in-law was arriving from Calgary as well, ready to share some brief moment of summer with you and the kids.

As we sat, with our ice cream cone, you asked why I was not recording our conversation. You wondered whether I had research questions to ask. It is true that when we meet outside the school walls, our encounters often become formal: recorded conversations about your stories, my stories, and the ways they brush against one another as we consider the audience who will eventually read them.

Yet this time, for reasons I did not immediately recognize, I did not want our exchange to be shaped by a research conversation. My day had been unusually heavy, and what I longed for was simply to sit beside you, to ask how you were doing, to listen as you anticipated the summer ahead with your children. I needed a conversation that was unencumbered by intention—one that belonged only to us, in that moment.

In the letters I have been writing to you, I see the traces of how I have changed through living alongside you—how attending differently to your stories, and mine, has invited new stories to be composed between us. I find myself wondering on how you may have been changed too. Who am I becoming in your life? How has this relationship, over the past year, marked you, as it has marked me?

This is where I pause for now. There are so many stories I would like to continue unfolding with you.

I wish you a beautiful summer, Mia.

I will call you soon.

Melissa

December 15, 2025Dear Mia!¹

¹ Notation written on December 23, 2025.

I find myself wondering what I wanted to write to you eight days ago. I am someone who usually remembers. I tend to remember experiences in their fullness: how they felt as they unfolded, who was there and who lingered at the edges, the tone of voices, the quiet conversations happening alongside the main one. I remember the background—the scent, the art spilling through, the texture of people’s clothing, the hum of sound, the weather, the time of day. These memories often stay with me for years.

And yet, eight days ago, while sitting at a writing retreat, immersed in dissertation work, something slipped. I remember the feeling clearly—an urgency, a pull towards writing you another letter.

I remember knowing it mattered. I remember sensing that it had something to do with relationship. That is the only certainty I can name.

Now, sitting in my home office, I cannot recall what I wanted to say. I only remember the impulse itself, insistent and unfinished. What called me then and what does it carry now?

I wonder why I felt unable to close this narrative account. What is this relationship asking of me? Perhaps this not-knowing is not a failure of memory, but a signal—an opening that has yet to take form, a story still asking to be lived before it can be told.

December 22, 2025 at 12h34

Exchange by Text Message

Joyeux temps des fêtes ma belle amie. Merci d'être dans ma vie. Heureuse de pouvoir écrire tes histoires ❤️ jtm

Read Yesterday

Ahhhh tu es dont bien touchante ce matin!!! Je voulais justement t'écrire à Noël!!! 🎄 ❄️ 📺 Je vous souhaite un bon temps des fêtes en famille. Douceur, santé et bonheur pour 2026. J'ai beaucoup de chance aussi que la vie a mis ton chemin sur le mien. J'adore passer du temps avec toi. J'espère qu'on va se revoir bientôt au début de l'année. Aussi, je voulais savoir comment allait ton p'tit coco?!!! Gros bisous 🥰 ❤️ 🤗
💖 🥰

Melissa: Happy holidays, my beautiful friend. Thank you for being in my life. I'm grateful to be able to write your stories. With love

Mia: Ahhhh, you're so touching this morning!!! I was actually meaning to write to you at Christmas!!! I wish you a wonderful holiday season with your family. Wishing you gentleness, health, and happiness for 2026. I feel very lucky too that life placed your path alongside mine. I truly love spending time with you. I hope we get to see each other again soon, early in the new year. Also, I wanted to ask how your little one is doing? Lots of kisses.



Visual Field Text 10

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Chapter Five: William's Narrative Account

Curtains Up (Skit)
Eminem

Setting William's *Project*

When my son started at the other alternative school, one across the bridge, after going to a regular public elementary school, I could see how nervous he was. I remember telling him that this school was not always here, you know?

It was someone's project—one teacher— she was also a mother—with a project. Her project was to create something for and with her children. She imagined a project that provided a space offering a different kind of education. In collaboration with other parents, teachers, administrators, community members, they built this school.

What started as a project, this collective project, slowly became real. That is why my son was able to walk into this place that day, it all started with a project.

I wanted him to feel that—how something imagined can take shape, how a dream can grow into a place where people learn and belong, you see?

I hoped Robin would carry that with him, even later in life, when he will continue to imagine [his life] projects.

I pause after saying that.

Melissa smiles, her eyes dropping to the page before her, scattered with colors from the same pens my daughter and her friends borrowed from her for their River project.

I check my watch. I cannot remember at what time the bus passes. Kenza and Julien will be here soon, and then we will head home. Robin is already back from school.

My eyes go back to hers as she asks me what my son Robin's future projects are. I do not answer directly because it is so not important to the story. I do not really remember because he has so many different ideas all the time. I certainly do not want to direct him toward something that is not his. My role is to offer him possibilities—to see what lights him up, what calls to him—and then to walk beside him.

For now, soccer is where I see it most clearly. He loves the game. I am happy about that because I have always loved it too, even though I never had the chance to play when I was a kid.

Sports were not really a thing. Still, I go with him, I coach where I can, and the rest we learn together. I am seeing that parenting should really bump up against forcing or pushing—it is about accompanying him as he discovers who he is and what he loves through the process, you see?

That, to me, is the power of these schools.

Children learn for themselves. We guide, yes, but the choice remains theirs. And because it is theirs, they lean in, they explore further, they push themselves. They create something they can hold, you see, with pride.

I see it.

I see it when I am with my children and their classmates during the project.

That alternative school is like that. A project that was made real, imagined and built by parents, not imposed from above. This is even more special.

The children's projects carry the same spirit born from within, carried forward by their curiosity, their effort, their joy.

Through this, they find confidence. They see that their ideas matter, that their creations are possible. And when they finish, they can share it proudly—because it is theirs, entirely theirs.

September 22, 2025

Dear Reader,

It is September 22, 2025, just before five o'clock. I sit in a room with twenty-eight other graduate students, each arriving from different cities, proudly representing their universities. This morning, I left my house long before dawn, slipping out quietly so that Louis, my youngest, would not wake and cling to me in tears. I wanted to spare him that heartbreak—the image of his mother disappearing at the start of his day and leaving Frédéric, my partner, to console him.

The drive was a kind of solace.

I had forgotten how breathtaking the world feels when the sun first edges over the horizon. The sky stretched out in ribbons of pink and red, as though the day itself was opening tenderly. When I called Fred along the way to wish him and the kids a good morning, he asked if the sky I was looking at was as beautiful as the one he was seeing.

Though the night had given me only three hours of unbroken sleep, the road soothed me. I sipped my coffee—two shots of espresso swirled with my favorite oat milk-brand—something I had indulged in over the weekend, a small act of kindness to myself, a reminder to keep going. Hannah Arendt's political ideas spilled through the speakers of my car in voices from a podcast, keeping my mind sharp as the landscape passes. And yet, in the background of this day, there is the silence of someone I still feel that I did not quite reach.

My last research conversation with William was back in June 2025. We had tried to organize one over the summer, but the timing was off. Occasionally, I would reach out—just to say hello, to check in, to see how he was doing. It would sometimes take a follow-up message or a phone call to get to him.

When we talked late last week, his tone felt familiar yet distant—distracted, perhaps, by the weight of a life that never quite slows down. There was a kind of restlessness that followed him, even in stillness. Overtime, I have come to understand him better—the person he is, the father he is striving to be, the quiet strength he carries beneath all that motion. He rarely speaks of his life beyond the school walls, offering only brief, unguarded glimpses, but I have learned to treasure those fragments. I felt grateful for the moments he could give. And maybe that is how I knew this work mattered to him—because despite everything, he kept inviting me in.

☺

This morning, I had a two-and-a-half-hour car drive to a writing retreat, a first for me, an event organized by a non-profit to help graduate students carve out space for their theses and dissertations. These gatherings are offered a few times each semester, and students must secure their spots in advance. I had registered for this one a month ago (August, 2025), while I was in Bergen, Norway, attending a summer institute on Narrative Inquiry—(a Hannah Arendt edition). While in Bergen, I had imagined devoting my writing time to William’s story, shaping something I could eventually bring to my doctoral committee. But when the moment arrived, my writing veered elsewhere, as it so often does. I can still picture myself in that small room in Bergen, wrestling with my credit card that refused to process the payment, telling myself that by the end of *this* retreat—this one here, right now—William’s story would at least find its way onto the page, however imperfectly, before I returned home on Wednesday night, back to my reality.

And so here I sit, in a room with twenty-eight graduate students, each bent over a laptop, immersed in their own struggles with language and ideas. A room crisscrossed with white power bars and tangled extension cords—it feels like navigating a giant game of Snakes and Ladders just to get across. The scent of damp feet drifts up, and I cannot tell whether the scent is mine or the person working at the table next to me.

The retreat began at 9:00 a.m. with brief introductions and a sketch of the days ahead. The organizers structure our time with “Pomodoro tomatoes”: fifty-minute stretches of focused writing, punctuated by ten-minute breaks. We had two tomatoes this morning, followed by a long lunch, then three more in the afternoon, until now. From five to seven, we were encouraged to step away, to rest our eyes and bodies, to do something other than stare at the screen, because we had two more tomatoes after supper. Half of us obeyed. The other half, stubborn or desperate, lingered.

Most here type in and with silence, without headphones, a habit I cannot imagine adopting. Even with some Tash Sultana blasting in my ears, I can still hear the steady rhythm of the keyboard beside me, crunches of someone in back of me eating her Oreo cookies and taking soft sips of mint tea. Amid these small distractions, I find myself circling back to William. Trying to find the words. Trying to find the story again. I tell myself, quietly but firmly, that it is time.

I find myself thinking about how I felt in his presence—about the moments I shared with him in different corners of the school, often with his children nearby—I remember the texture of our conversations—if such a thing can be explained. During the 2024–2025 school year, we would chat on Friday afternoons after his daughter’s project, while his children played outside—sometimes over the phone, sometimes on Zoom, borrowed from his lunch hour. In 2025–2026, he would be at school on Tuesday mornings, and he mentioned that it was difficult to chat afterward. He had reassured me that if any one of us needed to chat, he would find time. He truly seemed like a busy man. As I write these words, I hear his voice—the deep sigh that follows whenever I ask how he is doing over the phone. I hear him speaking of being swamped with work, the challenges of single parenthood, and the demands of school expectations that require him to be present so often.

From our time together, I have been collecting various field texts. I kept a journal in my car, writing in it after spending time alongside William or following our conversations. As soon as I got to my car, always parked in front of the school’s exit side door, I would drive a bit further to a quiet street—somewhere I would not be interrupted or have to greet anyone leaving the school—and write down whatever came to mind from my time alongside him. I established this routine as a way to capture my observations, to preserve what felt important, and to ensure I would not forget. I also kept a file on my phone using the Notes app, which I would open whenever an idea struck me—often while walking, running, or driving—as I reflected on our time together. I recorded not only the content of William’s stories of experiences and movement in the school, but also my own responses and feelings to them. Additionally, I repeatedly read and listened to the transcripts of our recorded conversations, letting the layers of understanding emerge over time.

What I have attempted to do is like a collage of laying William’s stories alongside mine. What I sought were his stories of being a parent in this school. What became apparent almost immediately was how difficult it seemed for him to share. His stories did not flow easily. Instead, I sensed he was more at ease when I asked him direct questions, when I offered a structure, a frame. He seemed to prefer the guidance of prepared prompts over open-ended invitations.

In this narrative account, I sit with the complexity of William's experience—his hesitations, his fragments, his particular ways of speaking—alongside my own stories, which unfold in parallel. I also wrestle with tensions in my role as a narrative inquirer: creating spaces where his voice can emerge, where I might live alongside him with both accountability and purpose, where our stories begin to be written, coming alive, resonating, and other times, diverging.

As you read, you may find yourself moving back and forth between his words and mine, between silences and speech, presence and absence. I have at times, literally and playfully set my stories beside his. I do not know how this should best be read. Perhaps you will begin with the first column, or the second. For me, it feels much like deciding how to eat from a plate: I am someone who loves to mix the pasta with the salad, tasting the spaghetti sauce with the virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar dressing, altogether. Someone else, and I immediately think of my husband for this example will prefer each element distinct, one at a time, with no overlap. For you to choose.

Finally, you will notice that at times William's words appear alone on blank pages. These particular excerpts stood out to me like bright, sharp shards of insight—words I needed to highlight, make bigger, smaller, turn sideways, so I could return to them and continue thinking alongside William.

Enjoy,
Melissa

“In an alternative school,
it is not the parent who needs to fit in
— it is the child”

My name is William.

I am the father of three—two boys and a girl. My oldest, Robin, is in high school. Julien, my second son, is in fourth grade, and my youngest, my daughter Kenza, is in third grade. This year (2024–2025), Julien and Kenza share the same classroom. That happens every two years, since each class combines two grade levels. When Robin was at the other alternative school, his classrooms were multiage in another way—he was in Grade 3 with children from Grades 1 through 4, with one teacher. At this school now, each classroom has two teachers, which shapes a different experience. The children not only learn from their teachers but also from being with younger and older classmates. Over time, they get to know a wide range of students and their families. By the time they leave elementary school, they will have built strong connections with so many children and parents.

C'est bien. That's good.



It is September 13, 2025. My husband and I find ourselves once again marveling at how quickly the year has turned, already edging into autumn. Each September carries its own rhythm, its own quiet urgency, even though, for now, our daughter is not yet part of the school system. This is the last September we will know as parents without a child enrolled in the school system. Next year, the start of the school and academic year will be different. I struggle to explain the feeling, but there is a weight to it. Sam is still in daycare a few hours a day—enough time for her parents to work, or in my case, to keep chiseling away at writing my narrative accounts followed by my articles to get a doctoral degree.

Yet the thought of her stepping into “the system”—that vast, shared passage we call schooling—lands differently. It unsettles me. I do not get to choose whether my child will walk through it; I only get to choose how. There are options, of course. I could decide to homeschool her or enroll her in a private, all-girls institution—I am unsure if these still exists, but that would definitely not be my first choice. Like many parents, I carry the responsibility of making that choice. Choosing the right school for my kids.

Back then, my eldest was still in daycare. Some of the other parents were teachers at an alternative school, a school where we were living at the time. They invited us to attend an information session. At the time, my wife and I—she from Ecuador, I from Haiti—were just starting to understand how schools worked here in Canada. We had both been educated in our home countries. The Canadian education system was new to us. So yes, we were open to learn about what schools we could have access to.

When we walked into that information session, we thought it would be a good school for him. He had this constant need to move, to be outside, to run, to climb. He really loved nature. That school had a really wonderful outdoor education program too. Every day, they had lessons outdoors. They seemed to understand that children learn not only through books, but through their bodies. Kids are curious beings, right?

And yet, I find myself caught between roads. As someone whose parents exercised their right to send me to English school, I too could place Sam in the English public school in our city. There is also a small neighborhood school, just a few streets away; I really like the idea that we could walk to school. This was never an option for me, but I would have loved to be able to do that. I can happily imagine myself walking beside Sam (and eventually, Louis too) every morning to school... a good feeling.

And then there are the alternative schools—spaces I deeply admire—the terrain of investigation of my doctoral research. I truly believe in the richness of their programs, the way the school community continues to imagine what education could be otherwise. But for us, for Sam, and soon thereafter, Louis, they are out of reach. Not for lack of transportation because I would be ready in a heartbeat to make the commitment of driving her to and from school for the next seven years, not for lack of commitment, but simply because of regulations—lines drawn on a district map that quietly, but firmly, dictate control.

Whatever school my husband and I choose for Sam—our local English school or the tiny neighborhood school a few streets

Robin was like me in a sense. A kid needing to move, a lot. So, we decided to give a try to send him there. We did not get picked the first year, when he entered kindergarten, so we tried again for Grade 1. When he was in Grade 1, he still did not get in. When we tried again for Grade 2, we got a called but they made a mistake and called us for the wrong year so the following year, what I did was like: do you remember, he was selected, but he was placed in the wrong level. I think that made a difference, you see, because he had been chosen. So, I think that made a difference because he got selected to start in Grade 3 at the alternative school. We were so happy. We knew that this would be best for him.

Well, what I really appreciate about this experience is that, yes, it is demanding for parents—it asks you to be present, to be involved in the projects, and to implicate yourself in different ways; however, what I really enjoyed most, especially at the beginning, was having access to the classroom at any time. As parents, we

away—the feeling that envelops me is the sense of loss. Not a loss of love, but a loss of access: a shrinking of the small windows into her daily life that I have imagined as a mother. If she grows up as I did—if school becomes, as it did and continues to be for me, the landscape where much of a life is lived and made—then I will no longer be able to walk beside her in that landscape the way I had pictured.

I find myself circling back to William's allusions to access. A wave of envy passes through me, my stomach tightening at the thought that I might not even have the option to enter the classroom, uncertain if I could step into the schoolyard at all.

That thought settles in my chest like a stone. Proximity will mean nothing if rules and philosophy keep me outside the classroom. I ache at the smallness of it: not being there to tuck an extra sweater into her locker, to slip an extra pair of shoes into her backpack before recess, to remind her to put on her hat when the wind turns. To be there when my child writes her very first sentence, cheeks glowing with pride as she runs to show the teacher. I want her to be running to show me, her mother, too. To be there as she begins to fall into the lives of the protagonists in the books her classmates will later read

could come in whenever we wanted. This was felt even stronger at the other school. Whenever we had a bit of time, their mother or I would go to the school, spend time there, and just help in any way we could.

There were a lot of outdoor adventures at the school. Parents would accompany the kids when they went outside. It really is good to be able to go out and play with your kid, you know? Your kid is still in in a pedagogical framework, but still, you could go out with your kid, go play outside, go for a bike ride. We would be outdoors even in Winter; they would bring them skating for example. You see, even when kids are on the bike for example, it is also an opportunity to learn.

aloud to each other after recess. I mourn the small rituals I will miss—the whispered jokes, the scraped-knee consolations, the faces of the friends who will become, strangers to me.

What is terrifying is not the school itself but the possibility that the parts of her day that matter most to her will become private in a way I cannot enter. I can choose the route she takes into the system, but I cannot choose the borders the system draws around her. And so, I find myself grieving, already, the tiny, ordinary moments that will slip between us.

“We talk about the concept of **co-educator** in these schools.

The teacher is there, yes, but the parent too.

We have access to the classroom at any time.

It's good to know that we have that **option**.

My favorite memory would have to be at the other school.

I would give presentations to the group.

I do not really remember on what, though.

It was interesting because yes,

your kid is there, but actually, you are there for the group.

I was happy.”

Not long ago,

I received a note in the weekly parent newsletter by a doctoral student doing her PhD.

It was an invitation to participate in a study about the experiences of parents in alternative schools in Québec. I remember reading it at work, I found myself intrigued by what this young woman was curious about—her questions felt important, because parents truly are at the heart of these schools. I also wanted to encourage her; pursuing a doctorate is no small task, and it feels right to help when we can.

I filled out the form and, that very same day, she called me. She was energetic. Her passion was evident. I even laughed at one point because she spoke about her research project with the same enthusiasm my children bring to their elementary school projects. She admitted that what worried her most was not finishing this project but imagining what would come next.

When I first saw the name William amongst the responses,

I paused. I did not know who he was because I would have remembered the name. I am good in remembering names, I am a teacher, after all. That same afternoon, I decided to call him. I introduced myself, explained what I hoped this research might become—a space where I can be invited in parents' lives in their children's school. I babbled, as I often do, to get the message out to him. He had a gentle energy—something I do not embody myself but deeply resonate with. Presenting my research felt effortless—he seemed naturally receptive, requiring almost no persuasion. He invited me to attend his daughter's project time the following Friday, suggesting we could talk afterward.

His name was William. The name alone suggested he was a father, and I felt an immediate sense of possibility. In imagining this research, this narrative inquiry, I had hoped that I would have the opportunity to work alongside a participant who is a father. Perhaps that hope was rooted in my own life as a parent. As a mother of two, raising Sam and Louis alongside my partner, Frédéric, I am daily reminded of the subtle ways gender shapes our parenting. Ours is a typical heterosexual relationship, and even with a shared commitment, there are differences in how we each approach our children. Those

During that first phone call, I made sure with her that the school had authorized her to carry out this work.

We met the following Friday. As she was approaching the room that I was in, I noticed her waving to my children's teachers and walking towards one of them. They chatted briefly.

I turned back toward the window. Julien was playing with his friend, tossing a blue tennis ball against the wall. Just earlier, they had been trading Pokémon cards—it is the big craze these days. One of his friends proudly showed off a “super rare” card.

My eyes move to the door as she approaches with a bright smile. She reaches out her hand for a handshake.

We chat for a few minutes before the girls come in. They already know her—it seems she was in their

differences continue to make me wonder what stories a father might tell and live in being a parent in a school like this one.

I wanted, in particular, to include a father—not because I assumed his experience would necessarily differ from that of mothers, but because I hoped it might invite me to reflect more carefully on my own story: how I was fathered, and how I now watch Frédéric inhabit that role alongside our children.

I hung up the phone feeling both excited and nervous. There was something in his voice—measured, eloquent, thoughtful. He congratulated me more than once in that short exchange: for reaching this level of study, for being present in the school, for daring to pursue such a project. His words were generous, but they carried with them a quiet weight: *do not let him down*.

The following week, I arrived early, as I always did, only to find him already there. This surprised me; I was usually the first to arrive. He moved slowly around the room where the children would soon gather, his presence: calm. Sunlight poured through the tall windows, drawing long bands of gold across the floor. From outside, the children's laughter spilled in—laughter so pure it felt as if joy itself had a sound.

classroom last week. For a moment, I wonder if she might be a teacher here.

The room we are in has four small tables. The girls settle at one with an iPad, working on Kahoot questions for their presentation. They scroll through images, deciding which ones to pair with each question. I notice the grammatical errors in their questions. How should I approach this, so they learn to check their work and make the correct edits? Language, after all, is important.

I tell the girls they have ten minutes before we switch activities. I ask my daughter to retrieve the other materials from her classroom—the bin with her name on it, filled with the supplies we will need for the project. The next step is to create the maquette, but to do that, we first need to understand what they envision for it.

I walked towards him as we shook hands. The gesture was formal, but it carried the gravity of a first encounter made real. He pointed to his two children—a boy and a girl, close in age, sharing the same classroom. We spoke of my research, my university, the winding path of doctoral work. And yet, even as we exchanged these words, I was already wondering: how do I gently turn this conversation towards *him*? How do I invite him to tell me his story?

I also need them to make a shopping list. I will ask each of them to draw what they are imagining, and we can talk about it afterward.

“What is a river?” Kenza reads from the iPad. “Is it A. a big thing? B. an ocean? C. an alien? Or D. none of the above? The answer is D: none of the above”.

“Why none of the above?” I ask.

“Because a lake is like a little river... something smaller than a lake, you know?” another one responds.

I decide to think aloud. “A lake is a body of water surrounded by land, not part of the ocean, right?” I look at Melissa, searching for validation.

After the period, Melissa and I find a table just above the wide staircase that leads to the cafeteria. On my right, the open-concept staircase offering a place where people can sit and hang out and leading to the cafeteria just below. On my left, the windows reveal

the gymnasium, where high school students are playing basketball. The air smells like a mix of popcorn and humidity.

Melissa shows me the consent form. It is straightforward. I sign it and ask for a printed copy, even though I had previously read it; it is always good to have a physical copy on hand.

We begin to talk about what led Robin's mother and myself to choose an alternative school for him.

Melissa asks me if it was because my own parents came to my school when I was a kid. She thought maybe that was why I am so involved, and want to, be involved at my kids' school. I smile, politely. How could I put this? No, this did not exist where I went. Maybe at other schools in Haiti. But no. At least, not in my time. I do not know if things have changed since then—because of course, the system is influenced by what happens elsewhere. But in my

days, school was very traditional, very *magistral*, as we say in French.

There was not much emphasis on sports or activities; those were secondary, almost invisible. What mattered—what everything revolved around—were the subjects. The lessons. Always the lessons.

Melissa highlighted the fact that I have chosen a truly unconventional form of education for my children—“to the extreme,” as she puts it. It is indeed, such a stark difference to what I went through.

We continue talking for a while, then wave goodbye to one of the kids’ teachers as she passes by, heading to get her son in the gymnasium. Melissa tells her that she will see her next week, apparently, she is replacing her colleague.

It is April 10, 2025. I am sitting with an unfinished transcript of our first official and recorded research conversation. This process has become a ritual: I upload the audio files in thirty-minute fragments, letting the software attempt its rough translation of speech into text. After that, I return to the conversation itself, listening slowly, deliberately offbeat,

As our conversation winds down, I ask if she could send me the recorded audio. I want to hear my own voice. Make sure I was okay.

retracing each word and inflection as I rewrite what the machine has produced. It is painstaking, and perhaps harder than it needs to be. But for me—for a dyslexic body and mind—this way of working feels necessary. The struggle, the slowness, the repetition—maybe it is what invited me to dwell more deeply in the stories.

As I move through this process with William's voice slowly whispering in my ears, I find myself breaking my own rules. I cannot resist highlighting certain excerpts in yellow, even though I usually wait until every line of the transcript is in place. That is my routine: endure the tedious labor of transcribing first, and then, at the end, allow myself the reward—the pleasure of analysis.

Yet, this morning, with only one-eighth of the conversation transcribed and revised, my hand pauses at my keyboard, our voices stop playing in my earphones.

I highlight the passage where he responds to a question I had asked him: about the space his parents held in his own schooling. I remember the impulse behind that question. I was wondering whether parents who long to be part of their

children's school stories carry within them their own memories—moments when their own parents had been present, important characters in the protagonist's school quest.

As I think back to that moment, I realize that my question to William—about why he felt compelled to be part of his children's school stories—was also, in a way, a question I was also asking myself. I wondered if his answer might lie buried in his past, in the traces of his own parents' presence or absence in his schooling.

☺

Not long ago, a friend asked me why this study mattered to me. Why choose to live alongside parents? Her assumption was simple: that it must be because I have what she teasingly called a “mommy brain,” that I cannot think beyond my children. After all, is that not what we say? Children are our world. Everything we do, we do for them.

I could have chosen otherwise. I could have lived this inquiry alongside teachers, or even alongside children themselves. I am a teacher, and I love working alongside children; thus, dwelling in their stories would have been equally compelling. What about teachers? There are stories there too—stories of labouring

within educational environments for which teacher training, and I choose that phrase deliberately, so often leaves us unprepared, a truth I know intimately from my own time as a student teacher and teacher.

When I first stepped into an alternative school, during an open house event, it felt as though a lightbulb had lit up inside me. My *formation* until that moment was propelling me to a very different PhD research study. That moment was a nudge—a reminder to keep my eyes open, to stay wide-awake. That same feeling returned after I sent my C.V. to the three alternative schools near my house and one of the school secretaries called me one morning because a teacher was sick and they needed someone to replace her for the next two days.

While these schools felt new to me as a teacher, the presence of parents—particularly at Mockingbird—felt deeply familiar. It was as if I already knew the quest and the characters involved, as though I had heard—perhaps even lived—this story before. In that recognition, a sense of safety settled within me. And yet, something else was there. A feeling I could not name. Unfamiliar. Unsettling. Not quite welcomed.

In my narrative beginnings, I had written about myself as a mother crossing into foreign territory, learning to care for my own progeny. In so many ways, I live alongside my participants in that same spirit and intent—imagining the future through stories of a mother who sees the value of being written into her children’s school lives.

But when I pause to consider why I asked William that question, I am pulled back into my own school stories. I see now how much they were shaped by the presence of both my parents—how their roles as central characters continue to echo in me.

This is why narrative inquiry insists that we return, again and again, to our narrative beginnings. For as I live alongside William, I find his stories invite me to re-enter my own. In writing them, I realize how some of my experiences are still seeking gentler endings, or perhaps the chance to be relived through different tellings.



I grew up in a traditional Catholic household. My mother, a stay-at-home parent, was a constant presence in our schooling. She ran the library, and each week she and her friends guided us towards books to bring back home—to cherish them like

treasures. She also organized the annual book fair—an event that still shimmers in my memory. I can recall the color, the smell, the rush of excitement as if it was yesterday. It was the same kind of wonder a child feels on Christmas morning—waking to a tree glittering with gifts wrapped in bright paper, a plate of half-eaten cookies, a glass ringed with milk, crumbs scattered across the coffee table as proof that the bearded man had come.

My mother was the one who created that magic—not only for me, but for all the children at the school. What endures most, though, is not the event itself but the feeling—the warmth of knowing she was there.

My father's presence took on a different shape. He appeared in the evenings—at governing board meetings, or on the sidelines during sports tournaments. When I was younger, he would bring me along to watch my older sister play; later, when it was my turn, he stood at the edge of the field as an assistant coach, supporting the phys. ed teacher, standing beside me.

In their own ways, both my parents carved paths into my schooling and education, each leaving a distinct imprint.

I knew even then that not all my friends had this. Some envied me to have the privilege to see my mother at school. I remember moments when my mother would slip into the cafeteria to make sure I had eaten my carrots. On the days she did not come, I often traded away her carefully prepared lunches for the contraband of childhood—fruit roll-ups, *Dunkaroos*, even the brittle crunch of uncooked ramen noodles. Now, as a mother myself, I understand her small intrusions. I would do the same.

There is a gap when I try to return to my childhood stories—in Grade 5, with the blink of an eye, both my parents vanished from the pages of my schooling. My father—the kind of father William imagines himself to be—disappeared from the quest, from the project. He was no longer beside me, no longer walking with me, no longer helping me reach towards what I could become. In losing him, I lost one of my allies—like Robin without his Batman.

☹

I pause here, because I must sit with what rises as I write these words.

In that pause—I hear William's reminder of the place parents hold in the lives of children—of all children in the school.

And I wonder if, had my stories held more characters—more parents moving through hallways, stepping into classrooms—I might not now be reaching towards a new story; a new retelling.

The word *community* comes from the Latin *comuner*, “to make common, to share,” and *comum*, “to speak intimately,” as well as *common*, meaning “a free city” or “a group of citizens.” It also carries the sense of “shared by all” or “held in common” (*co* = together; *mun* = change, exchange).

The root *munia* reminds us of duties and public responsibilities—our roles within a larger whole.

Community is, then, a place we hold together—our spaces, resources, histories, and principles. It is a place where we act, exchange, and take initiative. *It is a free city, where autonomy matters, yet each member bears responsibilities.* And it is a place of intimacy: where we can speak honestly, befriend, support, grieve, and celebrate—together.

We met on several occasions in 2024–2025.

Typically, I would receive a text message from her earlier in the week, asking if I would be at the school that Friday.

I remember the last time she came, as part of Kenza’s project—she seemed genuinely concerned about me. She asked several times how I was doing. At the time, I had been working long evenings at the election polls while also managing the final rush of clients’ year-end taxes. She noticed that my back was aching and asked if I was hurt. Then, after searching for a while through what seemed like an impossibly heavy, overfilled schoolbag, she finally retrieved a small container and handed it to me, saying it would help with the pain.

Later, she sent me the audio recordings, knowing I had hoped to find a moment to listen. I wanted to hear my own words again—to revisit what I had shared with her. When she came to the school, our conversations flowed easily, and I spoke at length. Listening back, I

It is September 23, 2025. 2:58 p.m.

I am sitting once again on the same unforgiving chair, wishing I had thought to bring a cushion like some of the wiser ones around me. It is the second day of this graduate student writing retreat, very intensive hours of circling with the act of writing. Last night we closed our final “tomato” at 9:00 p.m. only to begin again at dawn. Tomorrow, even earlier—6:00 a.m.

Before me lie the many field texts I have gathered, fragments of time and memory that I am now trying to weave into William’s narrative account. I move between my journal entries, scattered and sometimes untitled documents where I chastised myself for not yet beginning, recorded conversations, and the half-formed notes I typed hurriedly into my phone—often while running—thinking I would later recall the thought complete.

Each piece feels important, yet elusive, like trying to cup water with my hands. There is a weight pressing on me, a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. This account feels different, harder than the others, though I cannot yet name why. The responsibility of capturing who William is—his stories, his way of raising his children within this school, the texture of his days—feels immense.

wanted to be certain—that my words had been heard as I intended, that I was understood, that I remained whole in how I was perceived.

Sometimes, I was not able to chat with her after our time together in the project period. We would arrange to talk at a later time.

I did not hear from her during the summer months. In September, she called to ask if she could continue joining me at the school. I am now working with my son, Julien, who is in Grade 5, in Groupe C, alongside the sixth graders. My sessions take place on Tuesday mornings, and as soon as they conclude, I head directly to the office.

During our phone conversation to arrange her next visit, I ensured that the school remained in agreement with her participation. I also reminded her to confirm permission with the teachers. It is important to adhere to the established protocols and ensure that all

Before every official research conversation with him, I draft questions with care, knowing how precious his time is. He works full-time, cares for three children—often alone—and manages the seemingly endless routines of after-school and weekend activities.

There is something intangible that lingers from my time alongside William, something that unsettles me in ways I cannot yet articulate. Perhaps that is why this narrative account feels heavier, more delicate to write.

Earlier today, I reached out to one of my doctoral supervisors to ask if I might share the beginning of this account with her. I needed to know if the words I have begun to place on the page can hold him—his presence, his care, his complexity.

As I return to the stillness of the writing retreat, I find myself wondering whether the hardest part of this work lies less in the act of writing than in the responsibility of writing in relation—to lives that are not mine alone to tell.

members of the school community are informed and comfortable with her presence.

Since the moment we first met, I have been wondering how to tell his story, how to live it alongside him, how to retell and relive it through my writing. And now, in the quiet intensity of this retreat, I wonder if I am finally beginning to find a way to do just that. As always in this process, I cannot help but imagine how William might one day read these words—his words and mine, often parallel, sometimes overlapping, suspended together in this account.

I think back to our first in-person encounter, following a phone call. In front of his daughter and her friends, he introduced me as both a mother, researcher, and teacher. He had just learned that I had replaced one of their teachers the week before, and so the children already knew me.

Before officially introducing myself to him that first Friday, I remember him watching as I waved to the teachers, then stepping closer to them to ask for their consent to follow William as part of the study. Seeking teachers' consent to be present alongside my research participants was something I had committed to in my university ethics application.

My time at the school, however, began not as a researcher but as a teacher and volunteer. This was in September 2024, before the study had fully taken shape. It felt essential for me to spend time in the space— to get a sense of how I feel there—before imagining and proposing a research project. I could not picture the research puzzle without first coming to know the people who lived and worked within it.

As the project began to take form, in conversation with school staff and parents, I continued to spend time at school. Once my proposal was defended and my ethics approval received, I felt ready to slowly step into the role of researcher—to put on, as I often say, my “researcher hat.”

Over time, especially throughout my work alongside William, I have often wondered how parents—and in this case, William himself—perceive my presence here. Am I aligned more closely with the teachers? Or with the parents? Does such a division truly exist, and if it does, what is at stake when I am seen as belonging more to one side than the other? I sometimes wonder whether William notices my friendships with certain teachers, and if those subtle alliances shift, in any way, the relationship we have built over time.

I imagine him, too, moving through this school as a parent. Over time, I have observed many parents here—some passing quietly through the hallways, others pausing to converse with teachers, administrators, or fellow parents. I often wonder whether it is easier, in this space, to form connections with other parents. If I knew that my own children would grow alongside theirs for the next seven years, how might that awareness shape the way I carry myself, the way I speak, the way I inhabit this shared space?

I want to ask William about this. Does he see these other parents as allies, as companions within this community? Perhaps this is part of the story I am trying to retell.

As I write, I also find myself asking: who am I writing for? Perhaps this is the essential question. How might a future—perhaps even imagined—reader receive these words? How will they picture William and me, our stories unfolding alongside one another, scattered across place/space-time within the corners of this alternative school?

I am aware of the power I hold here—the power to shape, to guide, to influence the story's direction. I could, if I wished, lead

the reader towards one version of events over another. And yet, what I hope for is something else: that those who encounter these pages might travel with us—that they might sense the complexity of what William and I lived in this school, feel both the resonance and dissonance of our encounters. That they might hear the echoes of our conversations, sense the weight and gentleness of William’s presence—see him as I do—eloquent in his way of speaking, thoughtful in his movements within the school—grounded in ways I have come to deeply admire. How might a reader come to dwell within a story that is not their own—recognizing something of themselves within it, without claiming it?

“Yes, alternative school makes your child creative,
 yet that little spark, that seed,
 has to already be there.
 You see?

Just like a child naturally likes people, the alternative helps that grow.

It takes what is already inside your child and develops it”.

*Do not kill children creativity.
 Do not kill children creativity.
 Do not kill children creativity.
 Do not kill children creativity.
 Do not kill children creativity.*

I do not like this question.

She is asking me if I had expectations for the other parents my children spend time with. I do not like this question—because the answer is no. Why is she asking me about expectations? Why does she want to know this? I will turn the question around, sharing with her instead what I appreciate from the other parents my children spend time with: the gift of having different parents play important roles in my children's lives.

For me, it is not about expecting, but about openness.

Openness to other ways of doing, other ways of knowing, that come from other parents. This is not just for my children, but for all children. They learn that it is not only their own parents who can guide them, but the parents of their friends, too. And in that, they begin to see other approaches, other ways of understanding.

Taken from my research journal on May 2025:

I think I am beginning to understand what the word community means in place such as this school.

A community embraces the weaving of stories—each child's story told in different versions, from different voices and angles. And yet, no matter how the story is told, the quest remains the same. The protagonist is always the child. And what everyone longs for is the same too: a good ending, one filled with possibility, like the closing scene of a Disney movie.

I wonder: if Disney writers were to script the story of a child in this school, how would they do it? How would they cast the parents, the teachers, the friends, and even the walls of the building as characters shaping the journey? Would they write moments of struggle, of courage, of transformation, the way they always do?

And what would they choose for the ending—a neat resolution, or something more open, still unfolding, as real lives always are? And then I find myself asking: what if the protagonist was not the child at all, but the parent? How would the story be written then—what struggles, what sacrifices, what triumphs

Because if we speak of expectations—what would we even say? Personally, I do not believe a parent should expect something of another parent.

But if I am pressed, if I am truly forced to find one expectation, it would be this: to see all children as equal.

If your child is part of the group, then you are not there only for your child—you are there for all of them.

Even though a project may begin with one child, it quickly becomes the group's project. A parent who joins must understand this.

It is not only their child's project, but every child's project. And so they must consider every child's rhythm, every child's way of seeing, every child's idea. Each one brings their own contribution, and together it becomes something larger— a larger project in a way.

would take center stage? How might the ending look different if it were told through their eyes?

That,
I would say,
is all.

And again,

parents need to remember this—and teachers should remind them of it: it is not the parent's project, it is the children's project.

It is not *my* project, it is my child's project, or the group of children's project. Maybe some parents forget, so they end up talking as if it is their project. I can understand that.

But there is also this: it is not necessarily a bad thing if a parent wants their child's project—or the group's project—to be the best one presented, you know? Why not?

If the child can produce something really beautiful, really interesting, the best one, why not?

What becomes problematic is when parents start putting pressure on the children, stressing them out, pushing them to make the best project. That is when it

can be harmful. But if you see that you are working with a group of children who are interested, motivated, who have lots of skills, everything in place for them to make a great project together—then why not help them do that?

At the same time, there are no grades. And that is one of the good things about alternative schools.

This business of grading children—reducing them to numbers on a page—is something I am so relieved we do not do in alternative schools.

Because a grade, after all, does not define a child.

An 8 out of 10, a 20 out of 20—these are measures that pretend to say everything, yet in truth they say so little.

They shrink the vastness of a child's intelligence into something flat and narrow. A child can be brilliant in so many ways, but when we bind them to numbers 2 out

of 3, 3 out of 10—we fail to see the richness of who they are.

In this school, evaluation takes such a different form. We are looking for other things to evaluate, which is great.

How is the child within their world?

How do they move in the classroom?

How do they join in, how do they relate to others?

Here, children are given the space to speak of themselves. They learn to see their own strengths, to notice the places where they want to grow. And this, to me, is something beautiful. It is not the weight of a mark handed down by one individual that sees my kid in our environment. I think now that I think about it, that is what truly drew me to these schools.

I really appreciate that the evaluation becomes like a conversation, and we all carry the same weight. The parent with their children and the teacher.

At home, I witness my son as an extrovert—lively and always talking. Yet in school for example, I sometimes see him fold into himself, becoming quiet, reserved.

This environment asks us parents to include both realities and place them together. My perspective as a parent joins with the teacher's, and together we shape a picture that is more complete, more real.

I have things that I could also bring to the table as well as the teacher. The kid's profile thus because more realistic.

**As a parent,
I have a word
to say.**

*Children need to play.
Children need to thrive.
Children all have different intelligences.*

Because that is what happened—

not completely, but enough.

I became cerebral.

A child of reasoning,

not a child of play.

Taken from my research journal in August 2025:

Over time, William shared fragments of his schooling in Haiti—short glimpses here and there. For me, having been educated in Canada all my life, the Haitian school system was something I only read from reports and media portrayals. So, when we began our first official and recorded conversations, I wanted to ask him about it directly. I wanted to know his stories of school in a place that felt unfamiliar to me—not to confirm what I had been reading, but to hear it in his own words. I was curious to understand how his experiences in a system built around academic performance shaped his decision to send his children to an alternative school—one often dismissed by outsiders, portraying it as a “hippie” school.

We have been living on and off alongside one another for some time now. In coming to know him, watching him in the school, collecting and returning to field texts, writing and rewriting his story, I was often left with the sense that I did not yet have enough. There always seemed to be something unfinished, something held back or left unsaid, a piece I imagined he might still want to offer.

Perhaps that sense of incompleteness was mine alone, a reflection of my own desire to know him more fully, to reach

Play was not accessible.

I was in my books.

I was in my books.

No friends,

not really.

At home, the rules were strict.

At school, the same.

Il faut être serré.

We ought to behave.

We ought to make a good name.

And maybe that is why I influence my children differently.

Yes, I want them to succeed academically.

But more than that,

I want them to play,

to imagine,

to feel proud.

into the gaps of time I had not lived alongside him. It was not even in service of the writing; I was just curious. I was searching for something beyond the facts of his life, reaching towards an understanding of who he was, and how he had come to be. This has always been my way.

I think back to my undergraduate courses in exercise physiology, motor development, and nutrition, where exams were built on memorization. I studied endlessly—often more than most of my peers. I remember envying those who still found time for three-hour workouts (we were physical education student-teachers, after all) or for the student socials at the faculty of education.

My time was consumed with studying. Fred understood this well; he knew not to distract me during those long and very-intensive weeks. Early on, I had already memorized the facts. Yet it was never enough for me to know the what—I needed to know the why and the how. If Celiacs could not eat wheat, barley, and rye, I wanted to know what happened in the body when they did, how it felt, what processes explained the rule. I studied not just for the grade but for the story behind the facts—the whole picture.

In the alternative school, they do. They play a lot.
They go outside.

When I think about it, I agree with you, maybe it is because of what I lived back home that I chose this path for my children—to give them the chance to discover.

I was an introvert as a student. Bright, yes.
You know the term nerd? That was me. But not by choice. With time, I folded in on myself.

I did not want that for my kids.

If you are naturally introverted, that is one thing. But when circumstances force you into it—that is something else entirely.

The education system I knew was built to produce that. And I lived it as someone from a family that was not rich. Middle class, perhaps even lower

With the three other participants, I could trace their lives into timelines with few gaps. With William, though, the holes feel larger and more numerous. Over time, I have tried to fill them—out of a deep desire to understand, so that I might understand the truest and most complete story.

I came to recognize the way he answered my questions—always polite, with professionalism, but also never fully opening the door. This was something new for me to live with. Perhaps, I wondered, it was somehow easier to conceive a more intimate relationship with the other participants as they were mothers. It felt easier, somehow, to move across that invisible line between research and life, between the public and the private spheres.

With William, I felt compelled to hold a formality in our exchanges. To this day, I still use le *vouvoiement* with him—the formal *vous* instead of the familiar *tu*. In French, this choice carries a certain form of distance, of respect, perhaps even a certain deference.

middle. Others, from wealthier families in Haiti, may have experienced a different kind of schooling. For me, it was difficult. Yes, it made me strong on the academic level. I had the highest grade.

But what did I lose from this?

You even told me that I was eloquent when I talked. So I can see how that helped me.

But still—I wonder what did it cost me?

Reading this now, in October 2025, I find myself returning with new questions: What do we seek to show when we share the stories of research participants? Why are we so often drawn to stories that rest on the threshold of one's private sphere?

(To be continued.)

Parts of me were lost in the process.

**That's why I am trying
to tell you:**

We are teaching the child
to reach their potential.

Yes, potential.

If a child is capable of more—why—
censor that?

We move with the child;
with the potential—we see
in them.

I see Sam—older now.

Her hair is darker, fuller, curling around her face.

She is dressed in pink; I recognize that dress.

It is simple, yet the color makes her glow.

When did she stop being a baby, my baby? What did I miss?

In the blink of an eye—

that purity in her eyes,

that disarming sincerity—I know it well.

Around her, figures close in. They are everywhere—

before her, beside her, encircling her like a living tide.

I cannot quite tell what they want.

Where are we? *Who* are they?

Sam steps forward.

A sudden hush falls.

Strings swell—violins, double basses—

rising and quivering through the room.

The air tightens.

Everybody freezes, waiting.

And then, behind me, flutes answer—

clear and breathy.

They follow the violins.

I realize we are inside a symphony,
and she is at its center.

(A recollection of a dream, September 2025)

[silence]

It took time for me

to be comfortable with silences
and long pauses
in our conversations and encounters.
I had to learn to pace my wonders
and puzzlement.
Sometimes the silences become prolonged
and [people] reminded me:
I am not sleeping.
I have a lot on my mind.
(Caine, 2002, p. 135)



Visual Field Text 13



Visual Field Text 14

Photograph of Sam,
wondering about the story—
of maple-ing.

Children First
(song by Evan Sacobie,
Walostoqey artist from Sitansisk)

Chapter Six: Claire's Narrative Account

*"D'you wanna come on the slide?" a voice asked.
It was a girl, unfortunately,
but I went anyway.
She was brilliant on the slide,
she went really fast.
I was amazed.
(Anthony Browne, *Voices in the Park*, 1998)*

December 5, 2025

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fourth and final narrative account!

Before entering Claire's narrative account, I feel compelled to offer a brief guide—a gesture of orientation, a way of inviting you to settle into the multiplicity of voices and temporalities that animate what follows. Writing Claire's account has been unlike any of the others. Her stories move across generations and resist the linearity one might expect.

In this narrative account, I retell and relive, playfully, as Lugones (1987) invited, alongside Claire: her childhood memories formed in an alternative school; the remembered presence of her mother, who once roamed these same halls; the daily rhythms of her own children now learning there; and Claire herself, living these spaces anew as both mother and former student, carrying past, present, and future together.

These layers refuse to be distilled into a single narrative thread. They ask instead to be held in relation—to be listened to, returned to, and read with an attentiveness that honours the ways stories gather, echo, and refract through time.

In conversations with Vera about my difficulty imagining how Claire's narrative account might take shape, she suggested I read *Voices in the Park*, Anthony Browne's 1998 children's book. In it, four distinct narrators recount their own version of the same walk through a park—a simple storyline rendered complex through shifting perspectives, tones, and points of view. The next day, I sought out the book, telling myself it might become that evening's bedtime story. Louis, my youngest, loved it immediately. A few days later, I sent Vera a photograph: Louis perched on our entrance stairs, the book opened wide across his small lap, waiting for me to read it (again). There was something quietly instructive in that moment.

It felt like an invitation—a reminder of what it means to attend to stories from different angles, different heights, different moments in time. An image, perhaps, of how Claire's story

might also be approached: not as a single plotline, but as a constellation of voices that call to one another across generations.

I wanted to take up this idea of *multiplicity*—to work with the many voices that move through shared spaces, places, and time: children, parents, grand-parents, teachers, and, at moments, my own voice as I reflect on the ongoing process of co-composing this narrative account.

As you will notice, I experimented with different fonts, with the page and its margins, with images and drawings. Writing, when taken up playfully, became a place I could linger. It became a place where stories unfolded in motion, in the midst, and where I could repeatedly turn towards my own, tracing how I, as a narrative inquirer, a mother, an educator, a learner, was living alongside them.

What emerges here rests in a kind of pause—a “for now,” a continuation still being told and lived. Narrative inquiry seldom grants us a final ending. We enter research participants’ lives



somewhere in the middle, and we leave somewhere in the middle too. What stays with us are moments we witnessed, conversations that lingered, gestures and silences through which we came to know one another.

Claire’s narrative account offers, in many ways, only a glimpse of a larger parade—one that stretches long before us and continues well beyond our departure. Here, I simply offer what I saw, what I heard, and what I lived alongside Claire and the many people that accompany her.

Visual Field Text 15

This visual field text was taken from the book *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne, 1998.

*Every child is an artist.
The problem is how to remain an artist
once [they] grow up.¹*

Enjoy!!

Melissa

¹ This statement is widely attributed to Pablo Picasso, though no definitive primary source has been identified, echoing the ways stories endure through retelling.

I click on this document to open the page again.

I have opened this document too many times that even the cursor seems to recognize me.

It blinks like an old friend... perhaps even an impatient one.

The title remains, untouched after my first iteration—
waiting patiently for me to follow what it already knows itself—
To be.

verb; *to be.*

This is the final narrative account to be written (for now).
The last one before opening up another space.

I have read our transcripts so many times that I have lost count—perhaps as many times as I have read all the others combined.

I gathered all my field texts in one folder—
grappling to imagine how to include them on these pages.

Her words. My words.

Our story.

The living alongside her—
it all lingered differently.

They all do.

Yet this one,
the one before me now,
resists the first story.



Visual Field Text 16

I could not sleep last night. Not because of the children — no, they were sleeping soundly (for once). It was because I had spent the entire day writing, or rather, circling the act of writing. I had devoted the day to it, prepared myself for it, even romanticized the idea of a day spent in uninterrupted focus. The night before, I had located a new café I would go to first thing in the morning—one that seemed to promise a different kind of concentration. I even prepared a playlist with my all-time favorite music to help me get in the mood.

After ordering a dirty chai oat-milk latte—a caffeinated potion I had never dared to try before—I finally settled my things, and myself, at a table that felt just right. Not too close to the steady noise of people drifting in and out of the place but not too tucked

² Some of the visual images in this work were created using the digital animation program at Pixton.com.

away either. From where I sat, I could glimpse the outside world through the window's edge, far enough that the movement of cars and passersby stayed soft, peripheral, almost cinematic.

The table I chose was round and had two chairs around it. After placing my schoolbag on one of them, I unpack it slowly—my pink notebook along with the pink pencil case filled with colorful pens and markers, highlighters, post-its, a tube of lip balm, a pack of gum.

I placed everything neatly before me, creating a small pile of objects that made sense only to me. From my back pocket, I pulled out my AirPods and queued the playlist that helps me slip into my thoughts. I removed my watch and placed it gently atop the stack of books I had also brought—four of them, companions for when I might need a spark, comfort, or distraction disguised as inspiration. Then I opened my laptop, checked the outlet beside me to make sure the plug works fine. I dislike being interrupted once I begin. And there I was. Me, myself, and all my necessities to write Claire's narrative account. I put the "do not disturb" mode on my computer and opened *this* document once more.

This time though, it was not left completely blank. A few fragments had survived from the last attempt: tentative sentences about who Claire is and a few more about a story she shared of being a student at this school as a child.

There is so much I want to write in this narrative account. I imagine sharing stories of being a student at the school and about her departure after finishing Grade 4 to follow her friends,

about her memories of her own mother being present when she was a kid, about the stories she continues to live out in this school now as a mother herself and her own mother still present now in her grandchildren's school stories.

Still, I struggled to find a form that could hold all that I felt then, and feel now, in relation to her story — the complexity of resonance, of seeing pieces of myself reflected in her telling and living. Through Claire, her mother, her husband, and her beautiful children, I have come to see more clearly who I was, who I am, and who I am still becoming. Chambers (1994) comes to mind, writing about becomings and the “multiplicity of subjectivities that cannot be captured by any one single identity” (p. 25).

As I took my first sip of that strange, spiced drink, I become aware of this knot which was forming in my stomach. Something about what I had written at the last attempt felt wrong—not untrue; rather, unfinished, as though the words had not yet found their rightful texture or rather, their true voice.

I escaped the page.

I lowered this one—titled *Claire's Narrative Account*—to the bottom of my screen, joining the others that wait there in silence. Their titles remain unfinished, their contents partial: Document1, Document2, all the way to Document9—a lineage of beginnings. Each holds a fragment, a field text, a trace of an earlier attempt to draw closer to this final account.

I opened another document.

One that held none of Claire's stories to retell.

I could not sleep last night, even though I had made real progress on the other story that I also needed to take time to sit with.

As I lay on my side of the bed, one AirPods in, listening to a podcast of someone interviewing a neuropsychologist about neurodivergence, my thoughts drifted towards this final narrative account. I realized I had been telling myself, for some time now, that I already held everything I needed to write it. What I lacked was not the words; rather, the quiet courage to trust myself enough to begin.

After writing three narrative accounts (five including those during my master's), I thought that with time, with experience, with practice, the writing would become easier.

☺◡

Our relationship began by chance—an ordinary encounter that became so much more. I know this story exists, waiting to be retold and relived. I wonder if it is through the *act of writing* the retelling that the narrative inquirer relives the story, our story, the living alongside research participants.

I reached for my phone from the nightstand, lowering the brightness until the light is no more than a whisper. My husband was sleeping beside me. We both know that I should not keep the phone here, and yet, I did. I opened the Notes app, clicked on the first folder, PhD writing notes, and wrote a thought I had. I told myself to remember, in the morning, the thoughts that were circling in my mind at that moment. That quiet inner dialogue we so often have with ourselves. I reminded myself to open this very document the next day.

Moving from Substitute Teacher to Narrative Inquirer, 2025

At Mockingbird, kindergarten classroom

She met her in the schoolyard. She was substituting for the kindergarten teacher that day, gathering students in a small group as they arrived. She had come early, as she usually does, to read through the plan for the day and prepare herself. She felt tired — a familiar kind of tiredness that comes from nights of interrupted sleep, from parenting young children. She realizes that she often writes about sleep (and caffeinated beverages), in a way, at times, envying those who can move through their nights uninterrupted. That morning, she had already finished a coffee during the drive to school. After settling in, she went down to the cafeteria to buy a Keurig pod and poured it into her blue-marine mug — one of many she keeps at home. She has a quiet attachment to mugs, water bottles, and, more recently, tumblers. They accumulate in a kitchen cabinet. The one she used that morning was her husband's, the company's where he worked for — the headquarters located far away — a company few people around know of. She could not recall why she had chosen that mug over the brighter ones that morning.

She walked towards the schoolyard, a mug of fresh coffee warming in her hands, ready to bring the children inside. The yard was already filled with children, parents too, and school staff greeting the kids. She made her way to the area where she had been asked to gather the kindergarten students. Claire was holding her son gently by the shoulders, adjusting his backpack, making sure each zipper was closed and every strap secure, as if anchoring him before releasing him into the day. She was probably searching for his teacher. She lingered. The teacher noticed her moving with a careful attentiveness that seemed to mark both care and a touch of hesitation.

Other parents stood at a distance already assuming she was the teacher for the day. Some waved casually to her as their children gathered on the green synthetic grass square—the space where the kindergartens came together every morning as the older students entered the school.

Claire remained nearby. The teacher sipped her coffee, the taste of flavored black coffee unsettling on her tongue. Each attempt at a new flavor, that day, the pumpkin spice so many had been praising, left her unchanged in her distaste. Perhaps it was more than taste; perhaps it was the strangeness of drinking in public there, among children and parents, carrying a mug as if still in her own private readiness, not yet fully present in the day's rhythm. The teacher introduced herself to the children as they arrived, their faces already familiar from the cafeteria or the gymnasium, where she had briefly substituted for physical education. They remembered the outdoor activities they had done, the small adventures that had apparently marked her as someone who organized cool games.

Claire was dressed casually, in gym attire: black leggings, a gray sweater under an unzipped sporty black jacket, running shoes hinting at a morning either begun or about to begin with movement.

☺

The narrative inquirer caught herself noticing, briefly, the balance that she felt between an ease and attentiveness. She smiled politely, explaining to Claire and another parent that she was replacing the teacher for the day and she was to follow a three-page plan that detailed routines, responsibilities, and the morning calendar. The other parent offered a polite comment, kissed her child's forehead, and walked away, towards the parking lot.

The narrative inquirer reached for her phone in her back pocket and realized it was time to enter. She called to the children who were a bit outside of the green square in attempt to organize them,... resulting in a very zigzag line.

“You work at V?” Claire asks the narrative inquirer, pointing to the mug.

“Ah, no, my husband does” she replies, “how do you know about V?”

“My husband is an engineer there. It is rare to see the logo or for people to know the company,” Claire says.

As both of them continue some other casual exchanges, they walk towards the door. A six-grader opens it and waits until every kindergarten student has entered. The narrative inquirer follows the routine, waiting for the nod that signals she can lead the children to the basement to undress and store their schoolbags in their lockers. She always tries to spend as little time as possible in the cubicle designated to the elementary students lockers; it smells like wet clothes that gave up on ever drying. Children keep their lunchboxes in hand as they line up against the wall, showing that they are ready to start the day and go up to the second floor to their classroom. While they wait for one child who has just arrived at the locker with her mother, Claire and she keep talking—though the narrative inquirer cannot quite remember about what.

She thinks that it was about the possibility of taking the children to the library. There is something about libraries that always just make her feel good, secure somehow. She thought maybe that she could find a book she remembered from her own childhood, one that someone once read aloud to her. She could read it to the children that morning because they had a bit of time, just a bit of time on their hands.

As they move toward the staircase, waiting for le *chef du train*—the train conductor, their friendly gatekeeper—to press the button that opens the door leading to the staircase, the narrative inquirer suddenly bumps into one of her already confirmed research participants. The research participant wraps her in a hug before she even has time to react. The research participant looks at the narrative inquirer, then at Claire, and her eyes brighten, a flicker of recognition sparking between them, like she has a good idea to share. The research participant takes Claire aside while they all head up the stairs with the children, and the narrative inquirer catches fragments of their conversation. She hears the research participant mention that the narrative inquirer is doing a research study at the school, that she is looking to work with parents. The narrative inquirer watches them continue talking, lingering at the back of the line, and then both of them enter the classroom together.

“Mel,” Mia says, as the three of them come closer, “Claire would be perfect. She was a student here, too. You would get...like, a different perspective than mine. You know?”

There is a story I have been carrying for some time,
A story that constantly moves, shifts, hides.

I can sometimes feel it though,
breathing,
beneath the off-white page.

Every time I try to give it shape,
it slips through.

Each time I start a sentence,
I see the erasure before the ink even forms.
The backspace key becomes my loyal companion.

I ask Claire for more—
More time, more story, more of *her*—
more living alongside.

☐°∩

The time for telling has passed, I had jotted down in my Notes
app, an eye barely opened, that night, trying to catch a thought
before slipping.

I find myself drawn to think of retelling—
in the plural—
plural in the scripts,
plural in the act itself.

*Because no story,
once told,
belongs to one voice—alone*

Omi-ma, 1990s

At school, alongside Claire



Visual Field Text 17

This school... it really is something else. Different from anywhere I have ever been or taught. The kids learn so much in a single day — they learn to use their hands, to discover... They cook. They sew. They make jewelry. You name it, they will try it.

When our first daughter started here, we knew we had made the right choice. And when Claire came along, six years later, it was not even a question. Of course she would come here too. Her dad and I had seen what this school can offer. We actually found a place that invited parents in. There are a lot of parents who spend a lot of time here. Why would you not spend some time here if you could, you know?

Claire's in first grade, and she has just been chosen to represent her class on the student-school committee. They choose her amongst many of her classmates—my eldest too had that role throughout her time here. Claire is really proud. It is serious business to her.

There is a woman who was working here, someone everyone loves. You can just tell she cares — she kneels down when kids talk to her, remembers their names, laughs with them. She just has fun with them, you know? That is kind of all we want to see from a teacher as a parent, the rest will come... I really liked her too.

And then... one day, she was gone. Just like that. No goodbye, no explanation. Nothing. Claire was not able to make sense of it. She was so upset, but more than that, it was as if she was angry. Angry that no one will tell her why that woman left, had to leave. That face when she spoke about this during supper: her dark hair falling straight over her cheeks, her eyes fierce. She wants answers. All the students wanted answers. The parents too...

The student committee met in like an emergency meeting with some of the school personnel, hoping someone will explain what had happened to her, why she had to leave. The staff could only explain to them that it was "confidential" and they could not say more to them.

Claire was not able to accept that. She was mad because they did not give her answers, but also because students did not have a say in the school's decision about this woman.

I was sitting beside my friend, a mother I met over the years at school, and I see Claire in that meeting standing up. She stands up, her little hands clenched at her sides, and before anyone is able to stop her, she walks straight to the door and slams it behind her. Just like that.

As I finally find her in the school kitchen, her voice is trembling, "What's the point of having a student committee if no one cares what the students think? What's the point if we cannot have a voice in the decisions..." Not really knowing what to say to her, I try to change her ideas by getting out the flour, sugar, baking powder from the cabinet. Still in shock, I feel a touch of pride that she stood up for herself.

As soon as I left the first “official” research conversation with Claire, after she shared this story, among others, I knew I had to find a way to retell this story in her narrative account—whatever form it might take, whatever weight it would carry. Claire told me the story as it had been told to her by her mother, Omi-ma. She does not remember the story, not directly. This story was her way of explaining why she so deeply wanted her own children to attend this school: “That is the kind of school it is, a school that teaches children that their voices matter, that their opinions count, that they can stand up, even when they are small”. In my first attempts to retell it, I wrote it with Claire’s voice. I tried to find her tone. I experimented with form: weaving in images, bits of found poetry, fragments that would invite to feel it, to embody the story. Yet, something felt off. Even though Claire was the one who told me the story, I kept seeing Omi-ma. Her presence lingered between the words, as if the story itself, belonged to her.

☺◡

I came to know Omi-ma not through research conversations, but through my time at the school. The first time I saw Omi-ma, she was seated at a round table in the center of the younger children’s classroom—the main space where everyone gathers each morning and afternoon. From that open space, three smaller rooms branch off, serving different purposes depending on the hour of the day: small-group sessions with the teacher, collaborative projects, quiet work. That day, Omi-ma was making a collage with three girls. Pieces of paper and fabric spread across the table. I remember also noticing some dried leaves. It was autumn, after all. One of the girls, I later learned, was another granddaughter—Claire’s niece.

There was something about the way Omi-ma spoke: her voice carried a tenderness that was also firm, a quiet authority. As a retired teacher, she understood this school from different sides—inside and outside, as someone who has spent a lot of time in schools as a teacher and here, in this particular place, as a parent. Claire described her mother as “*parmi les parents le plus, plus, plus, plus là*”—a parent who was always there. Claire mentioned that Omi-ma especially adored working on school shows: sewing costumes, rehearsing lines with children, building sets, stepping in wherever she was needed. And she continues now, as a grandmother, to occupy that same space of care. As Claire spoke about her mother’s presence in her school, I could not help but imagine the stories Omi-ma might tell, a woman who spent her life in education, who knew the rhythm of classrooms and the language of children. Yet here she was, stepping into another school, first as a mother, then as a grandmother, in a place built on a philosophy so different from the system she was serving. I wondered how it feels to belong to both worlds at once—to be both insider and outsider—and how that shapes the ways one participates, cares, and identifies.

When I asked Claire why her parents had chosen to send both her and her older sister to this school, she was not quite sure. Both worked in education—her father was a university professor in social work—and, as she explained, “I don’t know how they heard about the school or what first drew them to its model, but I think it’s because it reflected their values. They wanted to be involved, to take part in their children’s educational journey”. In another conversation, Claire mentioned that her parents had also taken part of conceiving and creating the first alternative high school in the province. I think this reflection is what led me to write the story through Omi-ma’s voice.

Claire, October 2024

In Charles' kindergarten classroom, sitting in a circle



Visual Field Text 18

We are all there—the teacher, my husband, and I—but the conversation is directed toward Charles. From the moment we step into the classroom, the focus is on him. She speaks to him first, inviting him to share, to take part in a dialogue about his own learning. Who are your friends? What do you enjoy doing here? What are you proud of? What do you find challenging?

For us, as parents, it is deeply meaningful simply to observe—to watch how he engages with her, how his body language shifts, how his words reveal both what he knows of himself and what he is still discovering. The teacher hardly looks at us. Charles is not being spoken about; he is being spoken with. She tells him gently, “We’re here for you, Charles. We want to hear what you think, how you feel in the classroom.”

As a mother, I find that moment transformative. The meeting does not ask us to speak for him, nor does it ask the teacher to interpret his experience. It asks us all to listen—to him, to his sense of himself, to how he is coming to understand his own learning. In this space, the child leads, and we, as parents, are invited to consider how we might walk alongside him.

We learn that Charles finds it difficult to ask adults for help when he needs it. He is shy, I think, and perhaps the many adults he encounters each day make it harder to know where to turn. But still, the act of witnessing him speak for himself—of seeing him take up space in this conversation—feels like learning too, for all of us.

When I finally gather the courage to begin, the writing takes over. It envelops me completely. All I need is my fuchsia pink Owala tumbler set to the right of my screen, filled with tempered water; my fully charged phone on Do Not Disturb; my AirPods; and this laptop. Nothing else. Just the music and the sound of my fingers pressing the keys.

As a mom to two toddlers, my time with the keyboard, with the cold, off-white pages, is calculated and planned. When the writing finally begins, when I find that narrow opening and slip through, I cannot pull away. My thoughts stay with the pages; I want to fill them, to follow them through, to reach whatever truth waits at the end.

Each narrative account feels like a burst, a sprint.

I know when the words I have written begin to resonate, when what once sat still on a blank page starts to move something in me. It is a feeling I cannot quite name, only recognize. And when this happens, I crave reassurance. I want to know whether the retelling works on others as it does on me. I wonder if this is what Clandinin and Caine meant by reliving...

One afternoon, after finishing the first few pages of the account and writing Omi-ma and Claire's stories above, I reached out to a friend from my master's program. It was 4:27 p.m. his time,

six hours ahead of mine. I remembered how in Barcelona, people begin work later, finish later, live later. I had not spoken to Adrià for some time, yet I messaged him anyway. He responded instantly.

He told me to be careful with how I was imagining knitting together the multiple voices that retell and relive time, words, and stories alongside Claire. Maybe it might be narratively too complex, that the weaving might unravel, that it could lose its natural flow. His response reminded me that my role—the narrative inquirer’s voice, this outsider voice, my voice—matters not only in interpretation, but in the very acts of retelling and reliving these storied experiences: helping to navigate their resonances and to hold the threads together.

□°∩

Claire started kindergarten when these schools were only emerging, when parents had to search hard to discover they even existed. She left the school after Grade 4, choosing on her own to attend a regular public school and follow the friends she had made at summer camp—friends who remain close to this day.

In 2024-2025, when we began this narrative inquiry, her son Charles was entering kindergarten. The following school year, her daughter Elizabeth joined the school. Through these crossings, Claire continued to live her stories with the school—to revisit and reimagine what it means to belong there, not only as a student but as a parent shaping new stories for her children.

In the story shared above, Claire recalls her first teacher-parent-student report card meeting as a mother—an experience that mirrored her own childhood memory.

In a later conversation, she reflected on how the values of her early schooling continue to inform her adult life:

Even at a young age, you learn that your voice matters. That way of valuing kids really stayed with me from when I was a student at this school. Even now, at work, when I'm with the president of the company, I know there is space to disagree, to share my point of view, to enter into conversation, in dialogue, you know? There's always a way to say things respectfully, but I'm not afraid to speak up or do something about it. I know this comes from here, this alternative school—from being taught early on that my voice, but also who I am in this world, how I see it, has weight.

Charles, March 2025

In my project



Visual Field Text 19

I see maman and papa waiting for me in the hallway. I give maman a big hug. I want her to come sit with me in the circle as we do our presentations. There is also this lady who came to our class a few times before. Maman and Melissa talk a lot when they are together. She came a few times during my projects. She told us that she was still going to school. She's a bit old to still be at school... One time we went to the library with her, and I brought home a dinosaur book. She also came when we went outside for gym.

After recess, we sit in the circle to do our presentations for the projects. I know when I see Maman and papa that it is my project next, and after that, it will be lunch, and then I get to go home. I don't have school on Wednesday afternoons.

I'm already hungry. I already ate my snacks. Maman likes when there's nothing left in my lunchbox when she empties it. She always asks me what I did at school, but nothing really special ever happens. I see a lot of people... many parents too.

Before recess, we made cotton candy with Tia's mom. Mine was pink and tasted like clouds. I ate half of mine right away. Tia's mom is super nice. We do lots of cooking with her. She likes to make desserts. She usually packs up what we do so we could bring home. My schoolbag is pretty full when I leave school at the end of the day....I also get to bring back our teddy bear home. We made that with Emi's mommy. Mine does not have eyes on it yet— I'll need to bring it back next week so we could sew them on. I will sleep with Teddy tonight.

Today, for MY project, we are making tricottin. It's like knitting with a small loom. I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it though... On Sunday, it felt too hard. I wanted my friends to come to my project. Papa used his printer to make the looms. At first I was mad because the first one didn't work. I didn't want to try again. I didn't want to do the project anymore. It was too hard. Mommy didn't know what to do. She was worried about me. She gave me a hug. She wanted to help me. We made the loom bigger, and it was better. Papa works with machines for his job. He stayed at the computer for a long time to fix it so it would be easier. He printed it with the 3D machine.

I hear the teacher calling out my name so I could explain what my project will be. I don't want to talk. Mommy shows the class the snake we made this week

to get ready. So many hands go up! Everyone wants to try my project! I'm really happy. I made a snake... but now I think I'm going to make a Carpet!

We go to the scrapbooking room. Maman asks me to show my friends how I did the snake, the one I did at home. We always practice at home before doing it with my friends. Papa helps Adrian, my best friend, because I already know how to do it. Last week Adrian's dad came to school, and we did a really cool project. I had a hard time at first, but I asked for help. I was proud because I wasn't shy anymore. It wasn't hard to ask for help this time. I know what I want to do for my project next week, I want to make a piñata with maman and papa.

Yeah... just an ordinary day.

As I read and reread the transcriptions, I was struck with how often Claire returned to speaking about her children and how she imagined them inhabiting a space like this alternative school. Her reflections consistently intertwined the personal and the pedagogical, as if her memories as a former student were being reactivated through her role as a parent.

When it came time to choose a school for Charles, Claire spoke as if there was not really any other option. "There was no other school I wanted for my children," she told me more than once. The idea of Charles not being accepted into kindergarten at the alternative school seemed almost unthinkable to her. This was the place that had shaped her most formative experiences, the reunions where everyone sat scattered across the space, the projects that invited discovery, the freedom to move and to create. How could she not want her children to learn in a space that had given her so much?

Reflecting on her son's experiences, she laughed softly and said, "What child gets to do so many different things? Sometimes, I can hardly believe it. Sometimes, I think he's going to start finding special activities ordinary, because in one day he's done Zumba, gone outside, made slime, and watched a play". For Claire, the alternative school represented a place where, as she put it, "kids can be kids". She explained:

You know, for me, sitting all day long — just the concept of having assigned places in a classroom. I lived that when I changed school in elementary school, it was not alternative. I think it evolved, but still, the classroom was rows of desks; you had your assigned seat and had to sit for 85% of the day. I was a kid who never had difficulties at school, but just the thought that I had to stay seated even after two periods—oh my, I needed to stand up! Here, just knowing that my kids move... I have so many memories of reunions, sitting anywhere and everywhere, knowing that you are free to sit where you wish, to discover what works for you.

In her recollections, Claire's tone often shifted between nostalgia and admiration. Her words carried an embodied memory of movement and freedom; an experience she now hopes her children can also live. When she spoke of her own schooling, there was a visible spark in her expression, a sense of wonder still attached to those formative years. She described the alternative school as a place where she learned so many different skills that were not part of the provincial curriculum, but that made her love to learn and to go to school.

In conversations with her group of friends who did not attend an alternative school, Claire has become aware of the distinctiveness of her own learning experiences: “Oh yeah, I know how to do that or this — I already knew how to sew. At such a young age, I had already touched on so many things. So many interests, so many memories, on projects and topics so precise that I would never have done in other regular school”. Her memories of particular projects seemed to carry both emotional and educational significance.

One that stood out involved learning braille and later visiting a school for children who were visually impaired, an experience that left a lasting impression on her understanding of difference and inclusion. Another involved a karate project she developed with her father, who was usually engaged in the school’s evening committees but joined her for this initiative because of his personal passion for martial arts. These stories, though personal, reflect the broader pedagogical ethos of the alternative school, one that values learning as experiential and deeply situated in the lives of students and their families. To this end, Claire has noticed that ideas for projects often come from families. As she explained:

While the initial spark may come from the child, it’s the family who helps bring it to life. Parents are asked to accompany their children, adding their own unique touch. Each parent brings their own color—some are sporty, others artistic or deeply creative. Some offer structure, helping children learn how to be organized and disciplined.

Now, as a parent within the school, Claire found herself on the other side of the experience, facilitating and animating project

sessions with the children. When I asked her about what kind of color she would imagine bringing, she said she wishes to have projects that “integrates physical activity. Projects that explore nature, the outdoors. I know we will try to explore those avenues”.

The story shared earlier — written from Charles’ voice — emerged from one such morning when I joined their project and later met with Claire for a research conversation. She had arrived that day somewhat uncertain about how the session would unfold. Later, she reflected on that uncertainty:

For the tricottin project, I was torn. I kept wondering, does he really not like it? Are we starting off on the wrong foot by doing a project he doesn’t want to do? But at the same time, if it turns out to be a flop, well... that’s still a learning experience. Once we decided and announced that this would be the project, it was settled. It’s not easy, so we asked ourselves how we could make it more accessible. We made the loom bigger, chose thicker yarn — tried to adapt things a little, to help him keep going, to say: it’s okay, let’s try again. But I’ll admit, yesterday I was struggling. He was really upset, saying, ‘I don’t want to do this project anymore. It’s not working. It’s not good’.

Through this reflection, Claire revealed the nuanced and relational nature of learning as she understood it.

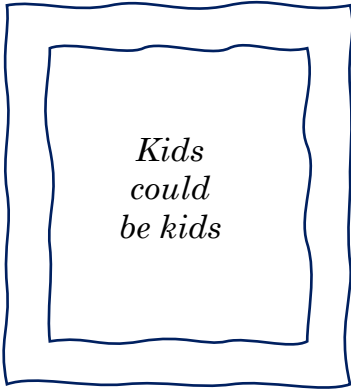
For her, projects are not merely pedagogical tools but living processes, they are moments of co-construction between adults and children, success and frustration, joy and perseverance. As she put it:

When they are in a project, even if you think it's just fun and games, there is a lot of learning happening here — beyond learning the subject matter, French, mathematics, sciences, and so on. You offer the child a space to discover, and that is what is exceptional about this school.

Claire's words illustrate how the values of the alternative school continue to unfold across generations, shaping her both as a learner and now as a parent/co-educator. Her reflections offer an understanding of learning as a participatory act, grounded in experimentation, care, and the belief that discovery itself is a form of knowledge.



*The alternative,
we sit on the
floor*



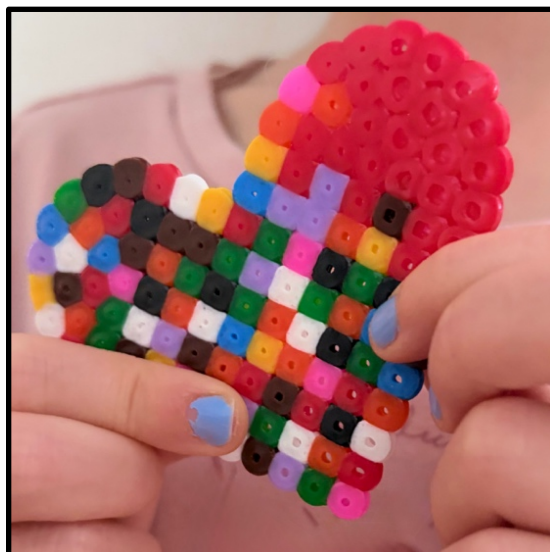
*Kids
could
be kids*



*School is
exciting here*

Narrative Inquirer, September 2025

In Elizabeth's project, with Omi-ma and Claire



Visual Field Text 20

The image is a piece my daughter Sam and I created together earlier that week. She was radiant with pride over the heart she crafted. At first, she announced it would be entirely red; moments later, she changed her mind, insisting it should be her favourite colour—the multicolour colour. My daughter Sam, so proud of her heart.

Once upon a time, in a school where parents were regarded as everyday heroes by the children, mornings began with a quiet rhythm—a half hour of personal time. On the second floor, where the elementary classrooms were clustered, the school slowly awakened. Some students settled at their desks to complete unfinished homework; others rehearsed for their project presentations. Laughter and conversation rippled through the hallway as groups gathered around board games or shared stories from the day before. This morning ritual offered choice and autonomy. Each child decided how to begin—whether to work, to play, or simply to ease into the day. For some, it was a moment to find focus; for others, a space to connect with friends before the structured hours began. These small acts of self-direction reflected something essential about the school's philosophy: that learning begins not only with instruction, but with presence, agency, and belonging.

Claire and the narrative inquirer took this quiet morning time to talk. Their conversation stretched into the second period, on a Wednesday, when it was Elizabeth's turn to present her project. Together, they made their way to the kindergarten classroom, where the class gathered—to see who would be chosen to take part in Elizabeth's project that morning. In the middle of the presentations, Omi-ma appeared. She had not been expected that day; even

Claire seemed surprised to see her mother step through the doorway. The narrative inquirer smiled, noticing her slightly flushed cheeks, perhaps from hurrying to arrive. Claire had once mentioned that her mother was not a morning person—that before 10:30 a.m., the world was best left to others.

Once it was decided who would join Elizabeth's project, Claire, Omi-ma, and the narrative inquirer led a small group of children downstairs to a quieter space. A space with three cubicles divided by walls, each table forming a small enclave facing the library. They all gathered around one table, the children's voices soft but lively, the morning light spilling across their materials. Elizabeth climbed onto Claire's nap and nestled there, claiming the space as her own. Claire gently asked if Elizabeth wanted to explain what they would be doing that day. As she spoke, Omi-ma passed around the materials, showing the different pegboards—flowers, animals, Christmas shapes, and a simple square for those who wanted to create something entirely their own.

The air was calm. The children were deeply focused, carefully placing each bead in its imagined place, intent on matching what they saw in their minds to what formed beneath their fingers. Some finished sooner than others, depending on the complexity of their chosen designs. As Claire began to notice who was nearing completion, she moved quietly to the other table—just beyond the dividing wall—to heat the iron. This would be the final step, the one that fused each creation together, allowing the beads to hold their shape without the pegboards. When the iron was ready, she returned to collect the first finished piece, a purple and pink heart made for the creator's baby sister, holding it gently, as if aware of the small pride and anticipation that came with it.

The narrative inquirer heard Claire inhale sharply—startled—but no exhale followed. She had just placed a bead in a boy's pegboard dog, a creation he had decided would include every color except pink, purple, and yellow, before heading to the other cubicle, where Claire was working with the iron. The narrative inquirer noticed Claire's gaze fixed on what had once been a perfectly assembled heart of purple and pink Hama beads, now scattered across the tray like candy spilled on the floor. She said nothing. Her eyes flicked to the heart, then to her watch, silently measuring the remaining time. The period was nearly over.

Both Claire and the narrative inquirer understood what it meant: in four minutes, each child would need to return to the classroom, their work in hand, and this small, deliberate moment of creation would soon be tucked away, memory and material entwined.

Without a word, they moved into action. The narrative inquirer began gathering the scattered beads, carefully placing them back on the pegboard. Claire darted to the supply jars, returning quickly with more beads. The little girl had deliberately chosen to use more purple than pink in her heart, yet she had confided to the narrative inquirer that she still wanted a touch of pink—because this heart was for her sister, and her sister loved pink.

From the corner of her eye, the narrative inquirer noticed the small face of the heart's maker peeking through the side of the wall, curiosity shining in her eyes. Claire saw it too. With a single, graceful step, she positioned herself between the child and the table, shielding the half-rebuilt heart from view. A soft hum floated from Claire—perhaps a tune, perhaps just the rhythm of her breathing—as she ironed the other designs flat. She had learned from the first attempt, the heart that had fallen apart: these new creations held together more firmly, each bead settling into place with quiet precision.

Omi-ma's voice drifted from the other side of the wall, where one or two children were putting the finishing touches on their creations. She was gathering the group, gently guiding them back toward the classroom. "We'll bring your projects once they've cooled," Omi-ma said, giving Claire and the narrative inquirer those few precious extra moments to finish each piece. They exchanged a glance—half relief, half quiet conspiracy—before sealing the final beads into place. When the narrative inquirer saw the heart whole again, warm from the iron yet intact, a wave of relief passed through her. Probably the same relief that Claire felt, as they shared a small, knowing smile. They packed up the materials, ensuring the iron was out of reach, and prepared to return the children's work to the classroom. Before heading to the staircase leading to the exit, the narrative inquirer paused at the stairs, ready to leave for home, carrying with her the perfect story to show the parent Claire is at this school.

Over time, I came to know Claire well. I knew what to expect when we met at school—her hands full of grocery bags packed with supplies: paper, glue, ribbons, markers—always prepared.

Dressed in comfortable sportswear with her hair in a tucked ponytail, she was ready to dive in. When I asked her how she approached projects, she said, “I’m very structured and organized—everything is planned—but I still want them to be creative, so I leave space for that”. That balance of planning and openness defines Claire, guiding how she fosters curiosity within a framework she shapes.

I learned that Claire would rarely be alone during project time. Her husband, Felix, often came with her, and when he could not, her mother, Omi-ma, would step in. In conversations, she explained:

It’s not that I feel incapable of being alone, because I know I’m capable and all that. But in terms of difficulty, it’s definitely easier with two of us. And I think, you know, we plan projects based on the fact that there are two of us. Sometimes I’ve done things on my own, but the projects weren’t necessarily as complex. If I know we’re going to do some cooking, considering their ages, we sometimes plan projects not necessarily more complex, but more suited to the fact that there are two of us. So, I think it allows us to do more things, for them to touch more things.

From my time alongside her, her projects were always awe-inspiring, leaving me deeply impressed. I often wondered whether she felt pressured to reach this level of creativity and attention to detail—and if so, where that expectation came from.

While Claire acknowledges the privilege of having a flexible work schedule that enables her to be present at school, she told me she wants to enjoy this time while it lasts: “I would always

be here if I could. I even block off my calendar for my kids' field trips before being asked by the teacher... For now, my work definitely comes second to this place". Watching Claire alongside different children over time, I could not help but wonder how other parents perceive her. Likewise, how different might their view be from that of the teachers?

Reflecting on my time alongside Claire, I came to see her as a source of comfort—a reassuring presence around whom children, and others, feel safe and at ease. In the story I shared above, the story of me, the narrative inquirer alongside Claire, fixing the purple and pink heart so that little girl would be able to bring back home her piece to her younger sister, feeling Claire in discomfort as all the beads scattered everywhere, I knew that she would find a way for this little girl to not be upset, to not feel left out...

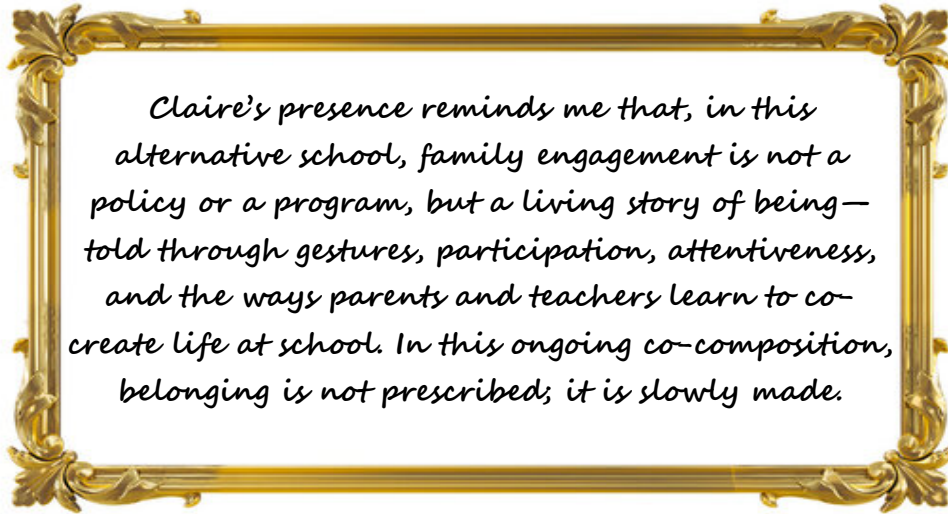
It was hard for me to write that story because there were so many different ones that I could have written to show who I came to imagine Claire to be at school, alongside her kids' projects. As I relive that story, my mind travelled to another moment where I had come to the school only for the hour when Claire and Felix would be there for Charles' project. Now in first grade (2025-2026), Charles' projects stretch over six to eight weeks—a transition from different projects each time for kindergarten.

It was the final period of Charles' project on piñatas. I had not known what to expect, but when I arrived, the room was full of beautiful piñatas, such festive creations that looked as though they had come straight from a party supply store. When I usually

came to the projects, it was difficult to focus on my research puzzle. Especially alongside Claire, I often lost myself in the moment—enjoying the children’s energy, handling the materials, imagining what could be. Yet, during that particular period, I found myself observing Claire as she moved among the children, checking in on their progress.

One girl sat alone at the second table, placing herself in the corner of the small room. She wore an oversized black hoodie, Christmas pajama pants, and Crocs decorated with colorful gems. I had noticed her before, taller than her classmates, calm in a way that drew my attention. She was cutting strips of purple paper, wanting to make a party hat for her moon-shaped piñata. Claire crouched beside her and asked softly how she was doing. The girl lifted her head, hesitated, and then raised a thumb pointed down. No words—just that small, honest gesture. Claire did not press. Before she could respond, Charles called for her from across the room, where the hot glue gun was heating up.

When the period ended, Claire turned to Felix and me, as we were trying to tidy up the mess we had made, and asked how the girl had been after she stepped away. There was something profoundly attentive in her question, she genuinely cared about how the girl was feeling; she was curious and wanted to know. As we gathered our things and stepped into the larger classroom, Claire moved toward the girl, and I noticed them talking as she handed over the piñata. A few minutes later, Claire was taking a picture of the girl, piñata in hand, her smile radiant—like she had just discovered that her piñata was filled with candy.



When I asked Claire about the presence she has for the other children, her response illuminated what I had already begun to understand about her. "I don't only come in with my mommy hat," she said, her words carefully chosen.

I try to be an example of a possible adult figure with them. Of course, I want to be a reassuring presence, especially given their age. I want the children to feel good when they take part in our projects. I suppose I naturally slip into a kind of motherly role—being caring, making sure everyone's okay, seeing if I can help, if everyone's happy and comfortable.

I had often wondered whether Claire arrived at the school first as a mother or as something altogether different—a collaborator, perhaps, a learner, a participant in something larger than herself. It might have seemed natural, even inevitable, that her identity as a mother would define her presence there. Yet what I witnessed was something more layered. Her care was not possessive; it made space. Her attentiveness extended outward—to other children, other parents, other stories—facilitating what was not originally hers to become, through her presence, gently shared.

The new parent that has zero experience with the alternative school, never really interacted with other kids than their own, it really is a huge learning curve for them to learn “as they go”.

Should we have the right to know about the kids we have in our responsibility? Who they are, how to take care of them?

If we could know about the kid who, for example, does not like noise, or the one who is scared of something, you know? Instead of putting them in uncomfortable positions.

I had asked the question, I told them I really understood that it was a matter of confidentiality and privacy, but at the same time, I have the impression that knowing more about who the kids are will help them, you know?

Yes, it would help the child, but also us, as parents, to develop our confidence in these projects, to help us to be with the child in the best possible way for them to grow.

You couldn't possibly write down everything that happens at school — it's all so case by case. You just have to rely on the parent's common sense... but still, sometimes, you know, things come up... maybe it could help.

Interlude: A Narrative Inquirer's Musing

It is the first week of October, though the weather has yet to receive the memo of the season's change. The air carries the warmth of late summer, lingering stubbornly, as if refusing to yield to autumn. In recent weeks, I have found myself drawn to the space above the city's art museum—a communal studio where local artists display their work. The city has preserved this room as a shared haven for its residents, a place to read, draw, meet, or simply *be*. Over the summer, I grew fond of this room. It is a place of color and light. One corner wall is covered in chalk drawings, evidence of children's brief but joyful interventions. A shelf of well-worn books and board games lines another wall. A kettle and coffee machine sit by the entrance, extending quiet hospitality to whoever enters. I usually settle into the green armchair by the window, from where the St. Lawrence River stretches outward, steady and constant.

One afternoon last week, a storyteller waited in the shared space for a group of elementary students. We exchanged a few words about his work—it is rare, after all, to meet another who also moves through life by way of stories. He invited me to stay and listen, and I did. There was something profoundly familiar in the way he told stories: how his voice shifted in cadence, how his body moved in rhythm with the tale, how the eclectic sounds of his instruments seemed to beckon us closer. He paused often, letting silence do its work—letting it breathe.

□°∩

As he told the story of how this place became a city, once a summer retreat for the wealthy families of Montréal's island, he invited the children to think about the life of stories themselves—that they have always existed, always carried across time, retold in changing forms and contexts. At one point, he held up a copy of a handwritten children's book, created in 1831 by Eleanor Mure for her four-year-old nephew, Horace: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. As he performed, the children and their teachers responded with laughter and awe, each age group finding delight at different moments. I wrote down something he said that stayed with me, something that echoed a question already stirring in my own work alongside Claire's account: *How can the act of retelling in narrative inquiry offer a space for reliving to emerge? And further—is it possible to write retellings in a way that one might actually relive the story, as a storyteller does through sound and sight?*

Before I felt this narrative account needed to pause, I ended with a few excerpts drawn from my transcriptions—fragments from Claire’s words as she spoke about her desire to know the children more deeply. She often wondered how understanding who they are might help us learn how to care for them better.

When I return to Claire’s account, I find myself moving through transcripts of our conversations, marking passages in color, following the traces of what still stirs. In the *act of writing*, I find myself layering meaning upon meaning, noticing how certain moments seem to pulse on the page. I think back to the storyteller and his craft of retelling—how, through voice and gesture, he drew his audience into the living presence of a story. In narrative inquiry, I find myself chasing something similar: the effort not merely to recount experience but to evoke it, to make it live again in another’s imagination. What would it mean for the Reader to feel Claire’s story—to hear the rustle of scrapbooking, the soft hum of children at work, Claire’s gentle laughter, and the quiet current of care that holds the room together? Perhaps, in the writing and rereading, the act of retelling becomes its own kind of reliving—a way of keeping these stories alive, still breathing.

Finally, returning to the different moments alongside Claire—that morning when she and I hurried to mend a broken purple-and-pink heart so a little girl could bring it home to her younger sister—I see more clearly the story Claire carries within these spaces. That small act—repairing what had fallen apart, doing so quietly so that a child’s joy might remain intact—holds the essence of *who* she is in this school. Claire is at once the mother, the maker, and the magician of ordinary moments. She moves through the day as though stitching invisible threads between people, ensuring that no one is left outside the circle. In these gestures of care, so seemingly small yet deeply human, I am reminded that stories, too, are acts of mending—ways of keeping what is fragile, *whole*.

Sam et Maman de Sam, October 2025

At home



Last night, I was coloring with my daughter, Sam. It is something we both find such joy in. Sometimes we pull out the watercolors, watching the intensities bleed into each other like soft thoughts. But most nights, we want to color. There is something steady about it—the way color deliberately fills a space little by little. We have tried all kinds of *crayons* over time, adapting to her motor skills development. Lately, we have been reaching for the *crayons de bois*, the ones that I keep away from where we store hers and Louis. Mine are always sharpened, carefully nestled in the still-intact Crayola box. I keep them hidden for special moments with Sam—and, soon enough, with Louis too. Lately, I realize these moments come more often than I expected. There is something about the *act of coloring*³ with wooden pencils—the warmth of the wood in your hand, the color vivid but never overwhelming—that makes these times feel special.

Sam has grown so much in these small moments. She now holds her *crayon* with such intention, her little fingers certain, her lines steady, staying carefully inside the shapes and contours. And I cannot help but watch her, realizing how even in something as simple as coloring, she is learning to shape her own becoming, her own story, her own world.

☺◡

³ Out of our life the eyes
 See peace in our own image made,
 Able to give only what we can give:
 Bearing two days like midnight. “Live,”
 The moment offers: the night requires
 Promise effort love and praise.
 Now there are no maps and no magicians.
 No prophets but the young prophet, the sense of the world.
 The gift of our time, the world to be discovered.
 And the continents giving off their several lights,
 the one sea, and the air. And all things glow.
 (Rukeyser, [1949]; 1992, p. 104, as cited in Greene, 1995, pp. 132-133).

We were sitting around the kitchen table, Sam and I,
 coloring as she ate her evening snack. Her brother had fallen
 asleep, and the house was, finally, still. We spoke in a very low
 voice, careful not to wake him, but also because coloring has its
 own kind of hush, a quiet that asks for gentleness. As we moved
 our *crayons* across the page, I would ask her small questions, the
 kind that float in softly — about her day, her friends, her world.

More recently, those questions have circled around her time at
 daycare.

Over the summer, we learned from whispers that some children
 in her group were not always kind to her, some making fun of
 her stuttering, the same stutter I probably had when I was a kid.
 We never knew the exact details, only that her heart had been
 touched by unkindness too soon. Mine broke quietly beside hers.
 This beautiful soul, already learning how hard it can be to live
 among others.

Our time alongside one another, coloring,
 has become our language.
 A place where she can speak without words.
 A way for me to listen—
 without pressing.

I know that if I ask her about her day—whether in the car after I
 pick her and her brother up from daycare, or at suppertime—she
 responds with ‘good’. And whenever I ask what she did during
 the day, her automatic answer is always, ‘Nothing’. Yet, when
 these questions are asked during our time together, while
 coloring, they seem to reach her differently.

Claire, April 2025

In conversation with Narrative Inquirer

My child doesn't really talk much about his days. I have to really pull it out of him.

Yesterday I asked him, "Whose project is it?"

"It's Tiago's project."

I said, "Was it with his mom or his dad?"

"It was his dad."

So, I asked, "How did it go? Do you think he's nice?"

"Yes."

Still, I think he seems to be okay. He seems happy. When I ask him about his "wow" and "buff" moments of the day, he usually says there weren't any "buff" moments — that everything was "wow." That's all I really get. I try to explain, "You know, Charles, a 'buff' moment can be when something made us sad, or worried, or angry — any emotion we felt". I immediately know what he will respond: "No, I liked everything about my day". That is usually the information I get from him. But still, he's not really the kind of boy who talks much about what he feels.

I also don't get a lot of cues about how he interacts with other adults. Sometimes I wish I could hear more. I get a bit of feedback when things happen in class, or sometimes if I run into a parent, I'll get a quick update. One mom once told me that her son and mine got along really well when they were working together on a project. But she also mentioned that sometimes they needed to be redirected because their games got a bit too intense. I hadn't known that until she told me. She said, "Nothing serious — they were just playing with cars, but then they started crashing them into each other and I needed to intervene".

I'm glad she told me. I like knowing that kind of thing. Otherwise, I really don't know much. Sometimes I feel tempted to ask other parents a lot of questions, but at the same time... you know.

Before Sam and I sat down together last night, I had spent part of the day trying to continue Claire's narrative account — her story, our story, the one I have been trying to tell with care. Something in me had gone still these past weeks, this feeling of stagnation. The same words came back to me, the ones I had written in the first few pages of this account.

***There is a story I have been carrying for months now,**
A story that constantly moves, shifts, hides.*

*I can sometimes feel it though,
breathing,
beneath the off-white page.*

*Every time I try to give it shape,
it slips through.*

*Each time I start a sentence,
I see the erasure before the ink even forms.
The backspace key becomes my loyal companion.*

*I ask Claire for more—
More time, more story, more of her—
more living alongside.*

After struggling to write much of anything the last few days — feeling as if the words in Claire's account had gone quiet — after yet another day of unproductive writing, I decided to pick up Sam and Louis earlier than usual from daycare. I timed it so it would not fall in the middle of nap time. I also wanted to let the daycare owners know that I will be spending some time at daycare this Friday for Halloween. I always try to phrase it carefully—not quite asking for permission but saying it in a way that sounds *respectful*, as if I am gently slipping through the

boundaries that separate parents from this place—and this is *practical*.

I still remember exactly where I was when that email arrived one Sunday evening. The new daycare owners had written to say that parents should no longer come into the rooms at pickup time. They felt parents were lingering too long, taking the educators' attention away from the children. If we wanted to speak with our child's educator, we were to book a meeting — outside daycare hours. Even now, months later, that message sits uneasily with me. It presses against something in me—not only as a mother but as someone who believes in these small and vital gestures of being in the spaces of our loved ones. The invitation to stay, to be present, to share space, it really matters. To be told to step back, to stand at the threshold instead, felt like a quiet undoing of the very ideas I hold dear: that caring for children is not the work of one person, but of many hands, open and overlapping.

Throughout the day and into the evening, my thoughts lingered with Claire's stories. I kept noticing how often our stories blurred against one another—how, through this inquiry alongside her, it felt like arriving at the same place through the same door, carrying similar, unspoken hopes. At times, as I worked through the transcripts, I would pause and return to the audio recordings, listening again to ensure that the words on the page were hers and not mine. More often than not, they could have been.

Claire and Narrative Inquirer, March 24, 2025

In front of the library, right before Charles' project

The narrative inquirer was late to the conversation that day. On her way to meeting Claire at school, she had turned back to the daycare, worried that she had not dressed the kids warmly enough. The air had felt colder than she had expected — the kind of cold that settles in before you realize it has arrived. She also wanted to check on Louis. It had been a hard morning for him; he had clung to her, trying to tell her in his way that he wanted to stay home with mommy. When it is one of those mornings, Sam usually lingers beside him a little longer before running off to join her friends and educator. The narrative inquirer just needed to see that he was all right — that he had found his footing again, that someone was there to hold what she could not stay to hold.

***Claire:** I find that the gap between daycare and school is huge, and I think it's even bigger with alternative schools in terms of autonomy... je suis une maman poule— mother hen- tending to hover. Really. And I own it...*

Narrative Inquirer: I'm very much a "maman poule" and I own it too. Like... I need to know what my children do when I'm not there beside them, how their day went, with who they played with... Each afternoon, between one and two o'clock, I keep my phone close. That's usually when I receive the daily message from their educators — a short update of the day's adventures. My daughter's educator always includes a few pictures, tiny glimpses into moments I've missed. On the days when no notification appears, I feel it immediately, an unease that sits beneath my skin. I find myself counting the hours until I can go pick them up, eager to know how they spent their day, who they played with, how they were cared for, to reassure myself that they were seen and safe in my absence.

***Claire:** I compare because my daughter is in her last year at daycare, and my son— there's just a one-year age difference between them. At daycare, when you arrive, everything is super controlled: there are two doors, you need a code, only parents have the code, there's the secretary watching, they have little fobs, and you go in...It's super super controlled when it comes to safety- it's incredible how strict they are now.*

For example, I once left a change of clothes for my child in a Ziploc bag, and they actually told me that Ziplocs are considered a choking hazard. I hadn't even thought of that. Everything is regulated. They even keep the children's water bottles there because of allergies, the risk is almost zero for everything.

Then I come here, with my son, and it's like a whole different world. It's a school that includes high school students too, so that's already a big factor. The bathrooms are shared with older students—you see kids from grade 11 walking around, there's a lot of movement in the school. Sure, parents have fobs to get in, but honestly, people come and go all the time—someone holds the door, people enter, and there's no visitor pass, no real monitoring of who's coming and going. Sometimes a high school student just opens the door for someone, and that person walks right in.

It's a lot of circulation, a lot of transitions. And then there's the way the children move around—you know, your child might end up with a group of parents you don't know yet. Some you get to know over time, others less so. Sometimes they even go outside with parents. You go from this super, super controlled environment where the kids never go out unless the educators are with them, holding onto their little rope like a line of ducklings—to suddenly this much more open, free-flowing environment. You pass from daycare where the washrooms are in their room, just with your friends, similar things you eat every day, super simple, it's cut the good way, grapes cut in two and four, to being in a cooking project where the parent, does the parent have the same conscious, or standards, to me?

A boy was in complete crisis. I hear a mom saying to the teacher: "You know, sometimes it happens that I take him in my arms, to calm him". The teacher answers to her: "I do not have the right to manipulate the kid so if something like this happens, I need to call the specialized education technician".

Why don't we know about this?

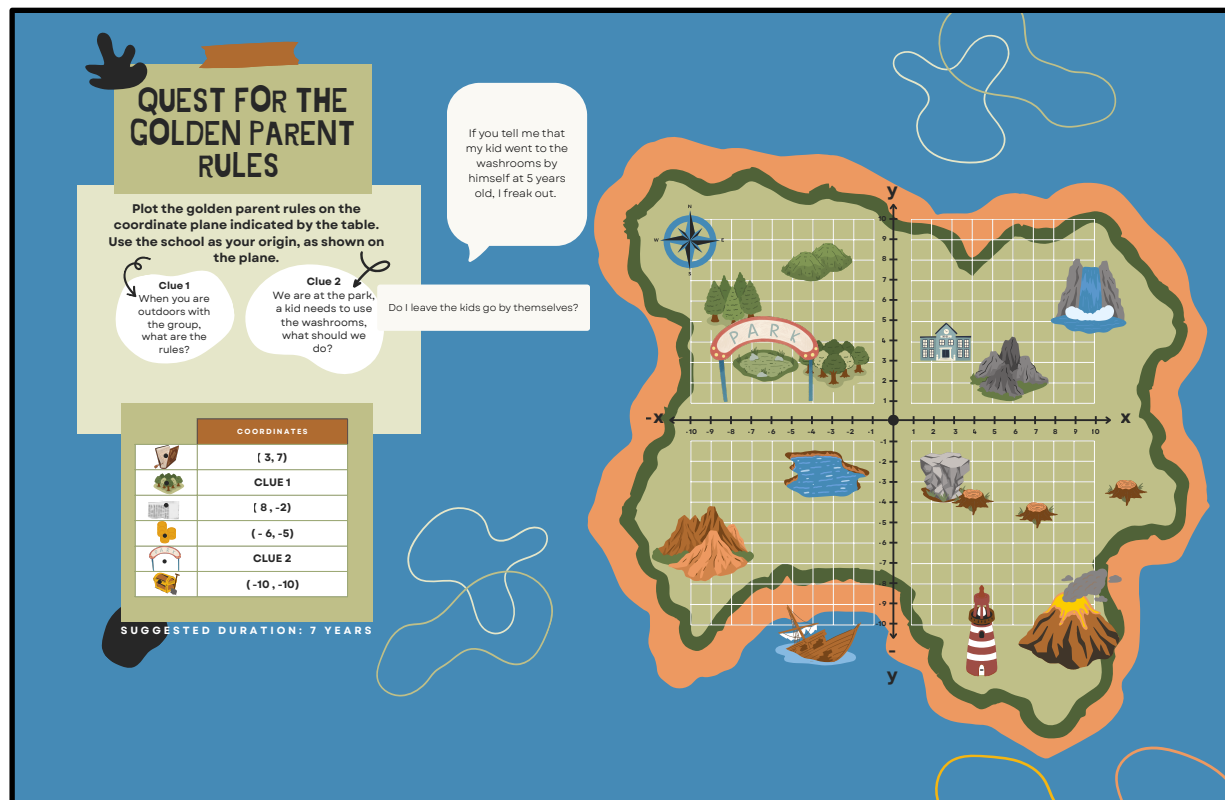
Last night, Sam and I were coloring a picture of a mermaid—floating in a sea of unknown. Sam decided that she was the mermaid because she was “colorful,” and I was the fish because, as she giggled, “you always want to kiss me”. I smiled, but something in me tightened, something that lives between love and letting go.

As she was coloring, I found myself thinking about how little control I really have over her world, her colorful world—where she will travel, who enters it, how she will be treated—what, where, and *who* will shape her heart.

When Sam finally decided the drawing was finished, our shared signature curling at the bottom before she added, as always, a few more bursts of color, I stayed there for a moment, just watching her. The way her hand moved across the page, the quiet certainty and complexity of her world.

I wondered about my relation to Sam will become as she will begin school, a place that I have spent, and will continue to, for a very long time.

In that moment, Claire’s voice returned to me. From my time living alongside her, with her stories, I often felt as there was this treasure hunt for parents to know how to take care of kids, the same way that Claire would imagine her own kids be taken care of.



Visual Field Text 22

This visual image was created using Canva.com.

After a few bedtime stories alongside Sam, and our negotiation of sleep—stay in your room, just try to close your eyes—the house grew still again. I wandered back to the kitchen table, where the drawing lay waiting beneath the soft light.

The mermaid floated in her sea of unknown—thinking how much that ocean resembled what I could not name or know—the places where Sam’s life will unfold beyond me, and where Claire’s words continue to move through me.

I opened my research journal, the one where I had earlier scribbled fragments of Claire’s story—her voice, her longing, her love stretched across distance—and began to rewrite them around the edges of the mermaid and the fish.

In that small sea of unknown, our stories seemed to meet — hers, mine, and the one my daughter is still drawing into being. It felt right to place Claire’s words there, in the middle of our colors, our lines, our small world, because in so many ways, Claire’s story has become part of mine.

We are both learning,
each in our own way,
what it means to mother,
to love,
to care,
not by holding tightly;
by loosening our grasp
just enough.



Visual Field Text 23

Claire wrote: "Your story about drawing made me think of this.
 The children had made placemats, and I had fun making one with them.
 It's simple—haha—not the same style as my tattoos...
 but in the moment, it intuitively made me think of that" (October, 2025).



Visual Field Text 24

While translating Claire's text message in the preceding footnote, I was looking at a family portrait in our living room and was reminded of how much this narrative inquiry is teaching me (December, 2025).

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Interlude One: Walking In Together

March 17, 2026

Dear Reader,

I hope you are settled comfortably as you begin reading this next set of chapters in this dissertation. I also hope for some rays of sunshine close by, as there are for me as I sit down to write. Prior to these lines, I had copied and pasted an email exchange with one of my doctoral supervisors. I had imagined this exchange to introduce this Chapter, which is the first paper. At the time, it felt *entirely* clear why this would work.

This email exchange began after I sent Vera what I thought might be a first paper. I sent it to her a week after the last day of the *International Summer School of Narrative Inquiry: For the Love of the World*, in Bergen, Norway (11-15 August, 2025). I smile now as I think back on *that* paper—and on her initial response. She told me she had to read it *a few* times. Returning to the first iteration of Paper 1—and to the email exchange through which I had tried to introduce—what this work might *become*—
i dwell in this perplexity—
i linger in the story—
 in the snapshot—
 in motion—

of living, telling,

retelling and,

reliving.

☺◡

I am carried to yesterday, before our planned *Zoom* conversation as I carefully prepare my questions to ask Vera. My eyes keep returning to a field text I had included—almost without realizing it—placed *right after* the email exchange.

This one, right here:

Each narrative inquiry is composed around a particular wonder, and rather than thinking about framing a research question with a precise definition or expectation of an answer, narrative inquirers frame a research puzzle that carries with it 'a sense of a search, a 're-search,' a searching again,...a sense of continual reformulation.' (Clandinin, 2023, p. 26)

I find myself asking: What might—a research puzzle *actually* look like? *Could it ever be complete?* And if it could, would I want it to be?

I am beginning to see how this methodology does not offer final answers—it opens an invitational space—to wonder, to dwell, to live, and hopefully, to act.

Narrative inquiry feels like the practice of holding many pieces in our hands—turning them over, examining their shapes and contours, sensing how they might fit, or refuse to fit, within a whole.

Each piece carries a story. No one begins with the same piece, nor does anyone ever complete the same puzzle.

Its edges shift as we inquire—its warm and cold colour change as we return—and return again—

(Melissa's Research Journal, August 2025)

This field text shows first, my unfolding understanding of narrative inquiry and second, the significance of narrative inquiry response communities. It is alongside a response community that the research puzzle begins—to find—

its contours,

its edges,

its colors,

—*becoming*—

alive,

vivid,

vibrant—

reverberating.



Drawn by that possibility, I sent this constellation of field texts to Vera.

As soon as I hit “send”, my eyes turned to the blue “undo send” button on the bottom-left corner of my screen, and hesitation overcame me. I froze, fixated as it slowly faded—signaling that the email was now, in fact, in Vera’s inbox. Mixed emotions suddenly moved through me.

Writing, for me, is not easy.

It never has been.

I am not sure it ever will—*be*.

sending parts of me,

alphabets, words, phrases—exposing

people—

in relation—it asks

something—of me.

I am learning—

how to hold—

to care—*live*—

alongside

be in relation, live alongside.

In narrative inquiry, we are asked to remain deeply entangled—and threaded—with people: to touch and be touched, to appear and listen, to speak and step back, to care while also finding distance. This relational roller-coaster ride must then be carried into words, onto what were once blank white pages *s l o w l y becoming* Times New Roman, size 12, 1.5 spaced black text. And now, as I write yet another letter to introduce this next part of the dissertation, I find myself imagining you, the Reader. I wonder how you might take up this writing, and how we might come *to be* in relation through it—across the words and worlds they carry.

I am carried to another moment: to my conversation with Vera yesterday, her calm and warmth spilling over my computer screen—wondering together about this narrative inquiry adventure.

I remember saying,

“you are part of my educational community.”

She responded by inviting me

to make this visible

to the Reader: show them

how I arrived here;

to *slow down*;

to remain *with experience*.

It is in moments such as these that I begin

to see—what

could be

other×wise.

It is from within this *light* that Paper 1 unfolds—where participation in a community is not a fixed category defined in advance—it is a relational practice continuously lived, learned, and negotiated alongside others.

In community,

Melissa

Chapter Seven: Paper 1

Title: Learning alongside families: A narrative inquiry into the experiences of parental participation in a Québec alternative public school community

Submitted to [School Community Journal](#) (April, 2026)

Word count (references included): around 5495 words

Abstract: This paper explores how parental participation is experienced within Mockingbird, a publicly funded alternative elementary school in Québec, Canada, affiliated with the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ). Educational research often frames parental and family participation as a measurable involvement aligned with school-defined expectations. This study instead attends to how parental participation unfolds within a school community where parents' presence is structurally embedded in pedagogical projects and collective governance. Drawing on the experiences of four parents at Mockingbird, the authors attend to accompaniment in children's school projects, involvement in school decision-making, and the navigation of communal expectations embedded in the school's institutional design. Working within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space attentive to temporality, sociality, and place, field texts were co-composed through conversations, observations, and reflective writing over the course of one year. Analysis conceptualizes participation as wayfinding: an ongoing process through which parents learn to move alongside their children's schooling and educational lives. When participation is structurally embedded and educationally consequential, it emerges as a morally demanding public practice rather than a peripheral contribution. These insights invite reconsideration of how schools conceptualize parental presence and the conditions required to sustain participation as a shared form of educational life.

Description of Authors

Melissa Daoust (she/her/elle) is a francophone doctoral candidate in Education at the University of Ottawa. Her work sits at the intersection of narrative inquiry, philosophy of education, and teacher education. She explores lived experiences in educational communities and alternative public schools, with particular attention to parents' and teachers' narratives, shared responsibility, and the relational and ethical complexities of schooling.

Vera Caine is a Professor at the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria. Her research efforts are a response to issues identified in communities and developed alongside peoples whose lives are most impacted. She has made significant contributions to the development of qualitative methodologies, particularly narrative inquiry and community-based research. In 2022 she co-authored the book *Narrative Inquiry: Philosophical Roots*. Earlier co-authored books included: *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry with Children and Youth*, *Relational Ethics in Narrative Inquiry* and *Essentials of Community Based Research*.

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focusing on the concept of historical agency and its potential in the classroom. In 2024, she received the University of Ottawa's Excellence in Education Prize. She is co-investigator for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded pan-canadian partnership Thinking Historically for Canada's Future.

Keywords: Parental Participation; Narrative Inquiry; School Community; Alternative School; Family-School Relationship

Learning alongside families: A narrative inquiry into the experiences of parental participation in a Québec alternative public school community

At Mockingbird Elementary School¹ in Québec, Canada, parents² are positioned as participants, partners, and co-educators within the school's organizational and pedagogical life. Mia, a parent of four children, reflected on this experience as she spoke about what it means to participate in this alternative public school community.

There are parents who arrive [...] at school, when it's time for a new project block alongside a new group of children, and they come prepared from A to Z. For example, "teachers say we have 8 periods to complete a project, then, here, this is what we are going to do." Me, I'm half-and-half. I like to be in control in life. With four children, I have to be. I decide everything. I organize everything. At home, I'm the one in charge. I don't really have a choice. When it comes to projects at school, I have to remind myself, every time, to leave room. To give the children space. More *liberté*. It's their project.

Now it starts differently. A child arrives and says, "Okay, maman, I'm motivated by this. For the sky theme, I want to talk about rainbows and make a model." We talk about it together. Sometimes it changes. Maybe it's not a model in the end. Maybe it becomes a painting. Maybe a mobile for the bedroom. And then it keeps opening. We write a letter, to nature, maybe. We send it to an organization that works on land protection. Sky becomes nature. Nature becomes the environment. It can go really far. We can even go on a field trip. Sky—you can do so many things with that. It's never just the sky.

(Mia, parent and co-educator, March 2025)

Mia's reflections illuminate that participation is not self-evident. Parents arrive with different stories, expectations, and ways of being alongside children and, over time, learn which forms of presence take precedence on this school landscape. Drawing on narrative inquiry, in this paper, we attend to how parents come to participate in the everyday life of Mockingbird.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the identities of the school and research participants.

² I use the term parent intentionally to represent the unique role of an individual who holds responsibility—sole or shared—for providing acts of care (Pushor, 2011). The verb to parent refers to the actions carried out by individuals inhabiting this role. Many people parent: those in biological or non-biological relationships with a child or adolescent; grandparents and extended family members; individuals connected through kinship or close relational ties; workers in group homes, detention centres, or hospitals; and those who become significant figures in the lives of children and youth through fostering, adoption, or blended family constellations (Pushor, 2011).

Turning towards Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, understood as a qualitative research methodology, is a way of studying experience through stories. It begins from the premise that human experience is storied and that meaning is composed and recomposed through living and telling (Clandinin, 2023; Caine et al., 2022). To attend to how parental participation is learned and sustained at Mockingbird, I³ worked within what Clandinin (2023) describes as a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, attending to temporality (past, present, and future), sociality (e.g., personal feelings, moral commitments, and broader social conditions), and place (e.g., the concrete sites where experience occurs). Living alongside parents in classrooms, hallways, and shared project spaces, I returned to conversations across months and co-composed field texts that held open the complexity of participation as it was lived in relation with children, teachers, and the broader school community (Clandinin et al., 2018).

Mockingbird Elementary School is a publicly funded alternative school in Québec, Canada, affiliated with the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ). In the United States and in several Canadian provinces, alternative schools—distinct from philosophically oriented models such as Montessori or Waldorf—have largely developed as programs designed to serve students identified as academically, socially, or behaviorally “at risk,” positioning difference as remediation within otherwise dominant schooling structures (Conley, 2002; Kim, 2005; Brown & Beckett, 2007; Peled & Smith, 2010). Québec’s alternative public schools emerged through a markedly different trajectory. Initiated through parent-led movements, these schools were—and continue to be—grounded in dissatisfaction with conventional schooling and a desire for parents to be more involved in their children’s educational lives (Picard, 2012; Bouchard, 2025; Fortems et al., 2023).

While parental participation is at the heart of these fifty schools, Mockingbird is distinctive among RÉPAQ in that parental presence is structurally embedded in its pedagogical design. On a weekly basis, parents accompany classroom learning by working alongside small groups of children during project blocks. These projects typically emerge from children’s

³ This paper is based on the first author’s doctoral dissertation. The second author contributed to the conceptual development of the manuscript, and with the third author, provided critical revisions. Both served as doctoral supervisors for the first author. The use of the first-person singular reflects the narrative inquiry philosophy and the first author’s primary role in conducting and co-composing the research alongside research participants and the narrative inquiry response community (Clandinin, 2023).

curiosities and, over time, take shape collectively through inquiry, experimentation, and shared reflection with other students, parents, and teachers. In addition, while the structure and learning outcomes of projects evolve as children grow older, they often begin the same way: with a student sharing an idea developed with their family. Classmates who wish to join the project raise their hands, and the student who proposed the idea works with teachers to compose the group. Following project sessions, parents submit an account documenting their time with the group and reflecting on each student's learning and development.

Beyond the classroom, parents serve on school committees, engage in other evaluative conversations alongside teachers and children, and contribute to governance and decision-making processes. Families are also paired with another family through a *parrainage/marrainage* system intended to support entry into the community and sustain relational engagement over time. Additionally, parents are expected to take part in *Togethers*—collective, formative spaces held three times annually after school hours—where parents and teachers come together to learn how to work alongside one another and to (re)imagine the school's pedagogical philosophy.

This narrative inquiry was conducted between March 2025 and April 2026 alongside four parents whose relationships to Mockingbird reflected different moments of entry, duration, and transition within the school community. Mia is a parent of four children, three of whom attend Mockingbird (2025-2026), with her eldest now attending an alternative high school located in the same building. Annie is a former Mockingbird parent who accompanied her three daughters at the school for thirteen consecutive years and whose involvement concluded in the 2025-2026 school year. William is a parent of three children, two of whom currently go to Mockingbird, while his eldest previously attended an alternative elementary school and is now in high school. Claire is a parent of two children in the early years of schooling and is herself a former student of Mockingbird.

Field texts included audio-recorded conversations, observations in the school community, and reflective and reflexive field notes. Building on these field texts, interim research texts, also referred to as narrative accounts were co-composed. Participants read and reviewed drafts of narrative accounts and actively took part in shaping these to ensure that the interpretive storied accounts that bring together events and reflections shared across conversations and time spent in the school community reflected their experiences and our relationships in meaningful

ways. Participants were also able to exclude aspect of narrative accounts that they did not want to make public at this stage.

From these four narrative accounts, I attended to moments that resonated across stories—instances of complexity, ease, hesitation, and adjustment—through which parents came to learn what participation at Mockingbird entails. This paper was oriented towards the following research wonders: *How is parental participation learned? What is the experience of sustaining participation and under what conditions? How does this learning shape one's becoming as a person?*

Theoretical Orientations

As I lingered alongside participants' narrative accounts, parental participation at Mockingbird began to appear less as a predefined role and more as movement within a landscape continually unfolding through everyday interactions. Drawing from social and ecological anthropology, Tim Ingold's writing on wayfinding unsettles the idea that movement follows a route already mapped; instead, he describes it as a relational immersion within a field of interwoven lives and stories. Ingold (2000) defines wayfinding as a "skilled performance" in which the traveller, "whose powers of perception and action have been fine-tuned through previous experience, 'feels [their] way' towards [their] goal, continually adjusting [their] movements in response to an ongoing perceptual monitoring of [their] surroundings" (p. 220). While Ingold helps illuminate the experiential movement through which participation emerges as a learned practice of attunement, feminist philosopher and narrative bioethicist Hilde Lindemann Nelson's (1995) notion of communities of choice, situated within broader "found" communities of place, draws attention to the moral terrain within which such participation unfolds.

A community of choice, as Lindemann Nelson (1995) writes, is a space "where its members can come together to discern, construct, correct, and celebrate the community's story" (p. 24). Yet these communities are never formed in isolation; they are shaped by the broader social worlds their members inhabit, carrying forward ethics, traditions, and social positions that continue to matter within the community of choice. These theoretical orientations guide the resonant threads woven across parents' narrative accounts.

Parental Participation as Wayfinding

The story that opens this paper, told by Mia, traces a gradual learning—of entering, living, and leaving space; of following children's lead; and of allowing projects to emerge

organically. For Mia, when she first began accompanying her children's school projects, she arrived prepared. She told stories of mapping out each activity for the number of weeks depending on the age level of children, anticipating outcomes, and organizing each step in advance. Over time, however, she learned that participation in this school did not require relinquishing carefully laid out maps; rather, it involved learning how to hold them while making space for the group's experience to redirect the learning. In other words, participation became a form of knowing as she went—worked out in movement rather than mapped out in advance.

Claire's story carries into a similar movement, where participation is lived as staying with what develops. This becomes visible in a *tricottin* project alongside her son:

For the *tricottin* project, I was torn. I kept wondering, does he really not like it? Are we starting off on the wrong foot by doing a project he doesn't want to do? At the same time, if it turns out to be a flop, well, that's still a learning experience. Once we decided and announced that this would be the project in his classroom, it was settled. It's not easy, so we asked ourselves how we could make it more accessible. We made the loom bigger, chose thicker yarn. We tried to adapt things a little, to help him keep going, to say: it's okay, let's try again. But I'll admit, yesterday I was struggling. He was really upset, saying, 'I don't want to do this project anymore. It's not working. It's not good'.

(September, 2025)

In recounting this moment, Claire does not frame participation as knowing what to do or ensuring success. Instead, participation unfolds through attunement—staying with her son through frustration and disappointment, adjusting material, pace, and expectations in response to their experience.

Claire understands this way of participating as rooted in her own childhood memories at Mockingbird. She often returns, for instance, to a karate project she once developed alongside her father. At the time, his presence in the school was mostly confined to evening committees. Yet for the project, he had joined her in the classroom, drawn by a shared interest in martial arts. What endures for Claire is not the outcome or product of the project, but of her father entering the classroom as a co-learner.

As a parent now, Claire approaches school projects as a landscape where family ways of being can enter the classroom. As she explained,

While the initial spark may come from the child, it's the family who helps bring it to life. Parents are asked to accompany their children, adding their own unique touch. *Each parent brings their own color*—some are sporty, others artistic or deeply creative. Some offer structure, helping children learn how to be organized and disciplined. (April, 2025; emphasis added)

Claire's image foregrounds how participation takes shape through the distinct ways parents arrive alongside the group of children.

William describes this idea of being present as one oriented towards discovery:

For now, soccer is where I see it most clearly. My son loves the game. I am happy about that because I have always loved it too, even though I never had the chance to play when I was a kid. Sports were not really a thing. *Still, I go with him, I coach where I can, and the rest we learn together.* I am seeing that parenting should really bump up against forcing or pushing—it is about accompanying him as he discovers who he is and what he loves through the process, you see? That, to me, is the power of these schools. (March, 2025; emphasis added)

What stays with me in William's story is how learning emerges through accompaniment: movement within a field of relations, without imposing direction, creating the conditions for interests and curiosities to emerge over time—for both William, as a parent living between school and home spaces, and for his son and classmates.

In conversations with Annie, participation appears as a way of living that extends beyond the school day. She often described her daughters as being “in project mode,” a way of being that travels home with them and reshapes everyday family life. As she explained,

The girls come to me with, say, a cooking project at home, and I just can't refuse. I'll say, 'Okay, let's just think this through. Could we do it? It's 8 p.m., we start from scratch, it takes four hours. I'm in. You'll do the dishes, I'll handle this part, you take care of that—alright, let's go'. (April, 2025)

In moments like these, participation is no longer confined to school-based projects. What begins in the classroom continues around the kitchen table, reshaping how time, labour, and responsibility are negotiated within the family.

As Annie reflected on her thirteen consecutive years of participation at Mockingbird, she noticed how these experiences have altered her role at home:

I feel more connected to my children because I go to the school. *I think that going to the school has changed my role at home.* The kids want us to do things with them—and we do. *We've learned how to work together with them.* I'm not sure I would be doing it as much if I hadn't been involved every week in all kinds of wild things. The kids would tell me the wildest stories... (May, 2025; emphasis added)

For Annie, these weekly school projects did not simply fit into family life; they reoriented its rhythms, subtly dissolving the boundaries between school and home.

At Mockingbird, parents learn participation not through instruction but through accompaniment—by entering projects as they unfold and remaining present and attentive to what emerges. Participation is thus worked out in movement with others: a form of wayfinding that depends on the conditions that invite parents, children, and the school to learn how to live this community life together.

Parental Participation and Its Conditions

On two separate occasions, as I described my research to friends, the response was immediate: a school like Mockingbird seemed designed for a privileged few. While I do not entirely disagree, my time spent in the school and my conversations alongside Mia have shifted how I understand what is at stake in such judgement. These conversations made visible that participation is not simply access to a school, but also a way of being—one that must be actively chosen, sustained, and continually justified. (Researcher's Field Texts, April 2025)

If participation unfolds as a form of wayfinding, it also depends on the conditions that allow parents, children, and the school community to move forward together—conditions continuously negotiated and worked out in practice.

Across the school community, parents described rearranging their lives in order to remain present—reducing work hours, declining promotions that required travel, or making deliberate financial choices so that time could be invested more fully in their children's education. Mia often spoke of pressures she feels beyond the school walls: to be financially independent, to contribute socially and politically, and to demonstrate productivity outside the home. Thinking with Lindemann Nelson's writing in feminist ethics⁴ helps illuminate Mia's commitment to

⁴ Lindemann Nelson's work is situated within feminist ethics, a field concerned with the moral and political meaning of lived relationships. As Lindemann (2019) explains, feminist ethicists theorize "the moral meaning of

remaining deeply present at the school alongside her children. Her presence is not passive; it is a daily choice made at a cost.

As Lindemann Nelson (1995) writes, membership within a chosen community can invite “certain individuating features of the person's life to matter in ways that aren't universally generalizable but remain specific to the person and so contribute to her identity” (p. 27). For Mia, the choice to be present at Mockingbird becomes one such feature—an expression of how she understands herself as a parent within and beyond this community. Yet, the conditions that make such presence possible are not evenly distributed, nor do they remain equally available over time.

Claire spoke openly about the privilege of having a flexible work schedule that allows her to remain present at school. As she told me, “I would always be here if I could. I even block off my calendar for my kids’ field trips before being asked by the teacher. For now, my work definitely comes second to this place” (April, 2025). Her presence at school is intentional and carefully protected, even as she recognized that it may not always be sustainable.

Alongside the four research participants, I found myself wondering how these conditions of participation—who could be present, how often, and with what support—shaped shared understandings of what counted as visible or valued participation within the community. Claire herself alluded to this complexity in another conversation:

It’s funny because while it is encouraged for parents to be at school—even just for the school to function here, you also see that such presence is not always well received by everyone. I personally heard some negative comments because parents were *too much* at school, you know? (December, 2025; emphasis added)

From my time alongside Claire, I had noticed that she often arrived carrying supplies for projects and was rarely alone during project time—her presence was supported by shared adult labor. Participation here was not sustained by a single parent alone, but through networks of family support that made sustained presence possible.

Claire described it as making participation more manageable, creating conditions for children to engage with projects in ways that might otherwise be difficult to support. As she

various kinds of legitimate relations of unequal power, including relationships of dependency and vulnerability, relationships of trust, and relationships based on something other than choice,” and attend to “the various forms of power that are required for morality to operate properly at all” (p. 15).

explained, “I think it allows us to do more things, for them to touch more things” (March, 2025). These forms of participation made her presence not only educationally consequential but increasingly visible within the school community. As participation becomes visible, it also becomes legible within the community’s shared expectations and, in turn, subject to subtle forms of evaluation, both explicit and implicit.

This complexity came into view in a moment I recorded alongside Mia and her husband during one of their children’s project periods. As they were discussing whether to postpone their group presentation, Mia said: “We won’t be ready to present our project next week; I’ll try to move it to three weeks from now.” Her husband responded, “Yeah, we won’t get a good grade if we present next week” (Researcher’s Field Texts, May 2025). In this brief exchange, familiar logics of performance and assessment—often associated with conventional schooling—reappeared within this alternative school landscape that otherwise attempts to resist them. However, what shifted here was where the evaluative pressure came to rest and who was asked to carry it. Rather than attaching it to an individual child, concerns were voiced as a family’s collective readiness and competence within the community. In valuing learning as a shared responsibility, parents such as Mia came to carry the affective weight of assessment—the anticipation of judgment, the desire to “do well,” and the fear of falling short.

William offers another way of thinking through this tension—one that neither dismisses parents’ desire for their children to succeed nor ignores the risks of performance-driven participation. As he explained,

It is not necessarily a bad thing if a parent wants their child’s project—or the group’s project—to be the best one presented, you know? *Why not?* If the child can produce something really beautiful, really interesting, the best one, why not? *What becomes problematic is when parents start putting pressure on the children, stressing them out, pushing them to make the best project.* That is when it can be harmful. But if you see that you are working with a group of children who are interested, motivated, who have lots of skills, everything in place for them to make a great project together—*then why not help them do that?* (March, 2025; emphasis added)

What William articulates here is not a rejection of ambition; instead, he carefully distinguishes between supporting collective possibility and imposing individual pressure. His attention shifts

away from achievement as a measure of parental success towards the conditions under which children and parents might flourish together.

In this community of choice, there is no settled rule for the “right” amount of presence, the appropriate level of ambition, or how parents ought to accompany their children’s learning. Lindemann Nelson (1995) helps make sense of this openness, suggesting that chosen communities create spaces in which members must continually discern and revise the community’s story. Precisely because parents *choose* this community, seemingly small decisions—stepping forward, stepping back, postponing a presentation, resisting assessment and evaluative pressure—acquire significance as they accumulate over time. Participation therefore becomes more than presence within the school; it becomes a terrain through which belonging is negotiated and judged both within and beyond the community.

Parental Participation as Moral Practice

You come
because you want
to be a pedagogue.

We value projects.
We value parents.

You can’t be
a consumer parent.
You must be
a *participating* one.

Show up.
Take part.
Not just for your kid—
for the *community*.

(June, 2025; emphasis added)

These words, spoken by Annie as her family prepared to graduate from Mockingbird, were addressed to families newly entering kindergarten. They do not function as rules or directives;

rather, they articulate a moral claim about what participation in this community ought to look like⁵. Participation at Mockingbird is not simply encouraged; it is framed as what Lindemann Nelson (2019) calls a *feminist ethics of responsibility*—a morality understood as “something we do together” (p. 117).

Participation therefore becomes a moral terrain of self-definition: decisions accrue—ways of being, forms of accompaniment, gestures of commitment—gradually shaping how parents understand themselves within the community. Annie gestured towards this kind of moral reckoning: “If this whole experience can create some distance from that *pressure to perform*—even for me, *as a parent, to ask what the class average is*—then of course I would choose to send my kids here. *Why not, you know?*” (March, 2025). Her reflection reveals that participation here is not only about being present; it is about aligning oneself with a particular moral horizon.

Participation therefore becomes what Lindemann Nelson (1995) describes as a moral track record—one that binds a person “to certain values for the future” (p. 27). At Mockingbird, parents are continually called to negotiate how to show up, how much time to give, how much space to take, how strongly to advocate, and when to step back. In a community where participation is structurally embedded and morally valued, patterns of presence begin to organize one sense’s of *belonging*.

Over time, those who are consistently present and aligned with communal rhythms come to occupy the center of the community’s moral imagination, helping shape how participation itself is understood and sustained. Those whose presence is intermittent or constrained risk drifting towards its margins, as trust and expectation are quietly recalibrated around them.

This tension surfaced in a field text alongside William:

After parking the car, I sit for a moment before turning the engine off. A quick glance at my phone before heading towards Mockingbird. A missed call from William—the parent I am spending the morning with. When I call him back, his voice is hurried. He will be late to his son’s project session because his meeting finished late and was stuck in traffic. I tell him I can step in. I have been accompanying the culinary project since its beginning. He thanks me.

⁵ Lindemann Nelson (2019) wrote that “feminist ethics is normative as well as descriptive. It’s fundamentally about how things ought to be, while description plays the crucial but secondary role of helping us to figure that out” (p. 17).

I hang up and walk towards the classroom to let the teachers know. Their reaction catches my attention. A look—quick, almost imperceptible. A tightening. A brief exchange of glances. This is not the first time William has arrived late. (Researcher's Field Texts, October 2025).

In that brief exchange, *belonging* became tethered to reliability. The teachers' glance did not simply register inconvenience; it marked a subtle recalibration of trust within the shared labour of children's school stories. Repeated acts of presence sediment into expectation, and expectation quietly hardens into moral measure. Yet the ability to meet those measures is never evenly distributed. What appears as choice is lived within conditions that constrain time, mobility, and attention—revealing how structural conditions shape moral *possibility*.

Lindemann Nelson's (2019) account of moral maturity helps illuminate what is at stake in these moments. Within communities of choice, members gradually develop shared understandings of how they ought to live together and to respond to one another's responsibilities. As she writes,

the goal of morality isn't only to discover but also to construct shared understandings of how to live well together. The test of the moral soundness of these understandings is in the goodness of the social arrangements they produce and the ability of the people within those arrangements to make moral sense of themselves in the life they live together. (p. 117)

Parental participation at Mockingbird becomes more than an expectation; it becomes a moral terrain where its members continually negotiate what participation requires of one another. Participation thus becomes the movement through which members learn—not only how to accompany children's learning—but how to *live together within the community*.

What became quite striking during my time at Mockingbird was how this way of entering, moving, and transitioning within this community of choice extended beyond the school itself into the broader social worlds parents inhabited. As Lindemann Nelson (1995) writes, "What is it to be a good [parent]? has intimate connections with the question, What is it to be a good human being? For this reason, the moral space created by the committee is also a space for reflecting on one's personal identity and one's place within society" (p. 26). Seen in this light, parental participation at Mockingbird becomes more than a feature of alternative schooling and

parenting; it becomes a moral practice through which members learn how to move, decide, and live together within the shared worlds they inhabit beyond the school.

Concluding Remarks

In this alternative school community, family engagement is not a policy or a program but a living story of being—learned through movement, participation, attentiveness, and the ways parents, children, and teachers co-compose life in community. In this ongoing co-composition, belonging is not prescribed; it is slowly made. (Researcher’s Field Texts, September 2025)

At Mockingbird, parental participation takes shape as a temporal, relational, and pedagogical practice in which presence is structurally embedded and educationally consequential. As the stories in this paper show, participation is not simply a matter of presence or involvement; it is learned over time through movement with others, shaped by the conditions that make such presence possible, and interpreted within the moral life of the community.

These storied experiences stand in sharp contrast to how parents are typically positioned in educational research and practice. In much of the literature, parents are not understood as partners, participants, or co-educators in children’s educational lives; rather, they are positioned as peripheral actors whose involvement is selectively invited and normatively judged according to school-defined expectations of engagement (Pushor, 2020). Parental participation is frequently organized through prescribed events and interventionist programs designed to align families with school norms around behaviour, homework, and academic achievement. In these arrangements, relational forms of care, shared responsibility, and being-with often fall outside what counts as participation (Hong, 2019; Ishimaru, 2020; 2022).

Within a community of choice grounded in relationship and responsibility, parental participation becomes a morally demanding public practice through which belonging is continually negotiated. Yet these stories do not offer a model to be replicated or a set of practices to be implemented. Instead, they invite further reflection on what it means to live educationally and relationally alongside families. What kinds of schools are willing to sustain participation as a moral and pedagogical practice rather than measurable outcomes? What becomes possible when care, commitment, and ethical presence are recognized not as peripheral contributions but as central to the shared work of education and schooling? When participation is sustained as a

relational and moral practice, schools may become spaces where families and educators learn not only how to educate children, but how to live well together—and beyond.

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Interlude Two: Between Lingering Breaths

January 20, 2026

Dear Reader,

I hope you are well—the sun is breaking through here. As I carry the last lines of Paper 1 with me and begin writing yet another letter, a song is on repeat in my headphones. It is one I remember listening to in the basement of my childhood home—singing and dancing with my sister, while disturbing our brother who was playing *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* just beside us. Our basement was our playground. The walls were this hospital-green color—one of them had a chalkboard—my *happy* space. I would ask my sister and brother to pretend to be students; I would always be the teacher. There was no other role that I wanted to take on. My sister and brother, finally persuaded to play along, would act like very “misbehaved” students—refusing to listen to me, stay still, or do the *homework* I assigned.

On other occasions, we would listen to music on a very big black square radio/cassette/CD player. We shared a small collection of albums between us. Among the many songs that became threaded into these childhood stories, one appeared this morning on the “My Daily Discovery” playlist on Tidal—a playlist curated for the listener, perhaps shaped by what had been playing, or *happening in the world*, days before. Its return caught me off guard, arriving unannounced as I sat down to write, pulling me back while carrying me forward into this next set of wonderings. It is a song by the *Black Eyed Peas*, released in 2003. I offer its final lines here as an invitation to stay with the stories in Paper 2.

I feel the weight of the world on my shoulder
 As I'm gettin' older, y'all people gets colder
 Most of us only care about money-makin'
 Selfishness got us followin' the wrong direction
 Wrong information always shown by the media
 Negative images is the main criteria
 Infectin' the young minds faster than bacteria
 Kids wanna act like what they see in the cinema
 Yo, whatever happened to the values of humanity? (Yeah)
 Whatever happened to the fairness and equality? (Yeah)
 Instead of spreadin' love, we spreadin' animosity (yeah)
 Lack of understandin' leadin' us away from unity

Where is the love?

Now sing with me, y'all

*Hands in water, dirt, and heat—
words and worlds colliding—
lingering $\approx$ protesting*



Photograph taken in Rivière-du-Loup, Québec;
mid-way, mid-sea; at its threshold—
dancing with wolves. (March, 2026)

Chapter Eight: Paper 2

Title: Contemplating spaces of appearance: Inquiring narratively into the experiences of parents in an alternative public school.

Potential Journal: Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education

Word count (references excluded): 6287 words

Abstract: Thinking alongside Hannah Arendt's notion of spaces of appearance, we explore how parents come to appear within the life of a school. We draw on a narrative inquiry study with four parents at Mockingbird Elementary School, a publicly funded alternative school in Québec, Canada, affiliated with the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ). Parents' experiences of the school's admission process, collaborative project work alongside children, and evaluative conversations about students' learning offer sites where parents come to appear within the life of the school community. In these moments, appearance is more than a matter of presence. Appearance is summoned through institutional conditions, lived relationally alongside others, and shaped through forms of judgment that influence how parents come to be recognized within the community. While alternative schools such as Mockingbird invite parents into shared educational labour, these spaces remain fragile. Thinking with Arendt shows how the conditions that make appearance possible shape the limits of plurality within schooling.

Description of Authors

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Keywords: Narrative inquiry; spaces of appearance; Hannah Arendt; parental participation; alternative public schools; Québec

**Contemplating spaces of appearance:
Inquiring narratively in the experiences of parents in an alternative public school.**

I pull into the school's parking lot, aware that this place may soon matter to our family. The car's headlights skim the edges of the playground, stretching long, familiar shadows across the ground. It occurs to me that this could be the place where our daughter—and soon after, our son—will spend much of their childhood. A place that might shape—their days, their friendships, their love for learning, their sense of self.

Tonight, as I gaze through the windshield at this stillness, I am struck by the enormity—and the tenderness—of this moment. I take a deep breath, reach for my backpack, and step out of the car. A woman with bright red lipstick and a wide, welcoming smile greets me at the door. “Welcome,” she says warmly. I smile back, assuming she is a teacher. “My name is Myriam²,” she continues as I step inside. “I’m a parent³ here. We’re part of the school’s admission committee.” She looks at me closely. “Are you registered? You need to sign in—this meeting is mandatory if you want to enroll your child.” I nod, confirming that I am. Inside, a sea of chairs awaits—more than a hundred. There is no way they will all be filled, I think, as I choose a chair in the middle of the third row. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m., leaving me fifteen minutes to wait. I glance around, taking in the space.

Nearby, a mother talking with a small group catches my attention. “This is my fifth alternative school visit this year,” she says. “We’ll try them all, and eventually they’re bound to draw our name—I’m convinced.” Another parent chimes in, “I went to the new school last week—you know, the one that just opened. The program is incredible.” A

¹ This paper is based on the first author's doctoral dissertation. The second author contributed to the manuscript's conceptual development and critical revision while serving as a doctoral supervisor. The use of the first-person singular reflects the commitments of narrative inquiry and the first author's role in conducting and co-composing the research alongside participants and the response community (Clandinin, 2023).

² Pseudonyms are used throughout this narrative inquiry to protect the identities of the school, research participants, and community members.

³ I use the term parent intentionally to represent the unique role of an individual who holds responsibility—sole or shared—for providing acts of care (Pushor, 2011). The verb to parent refers to the actions carried out by individuals inhabiting this role. Many people parent: those in biological or non-biological relationships with a child or adolescent; grandparents and extended family members; individuals connected through kinship or close relational ties; workers in group homes, detention centres, or hospitals; and those who become significant figures in the lives of children and youth through fostering, adoption, or blended family constellations (Pushor, 2011).

third adds with a laugh, “the selection process really depends on each school and what kind of parents they want,” the woman continues.

(Researcher’s Journal Entry, September 2024)

The opening field text was written before the questions it would provoke became central to my doctoral research. I first wrote it to make sense of an evening that lingered—an intimate moment that drew me into wondering about the responsibilities involved in shaping the conditions through which my children will come to live and tell their school stories. Returning to this field text over time, I became increasingly attentive to how parents come to appear within publicly funded alternative schools in Québec, Canada.

In this paper, I explore the educational terrain of *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ), focusing on a particular school where parents are expected to take up the role of co-educators—an expectation that situates them as active participants in shaping children’s school lives and stories. This role is embedded in the everyday practices of the school through weekly commitments alongside children, participation in committees, involvement in tripartite assessment, and engagement in broader governance and decision-making structures. Drawing on narrative inquiry and thinking with Hannah Arendt’s (1958) notion of spaces of appearance, I attend to parents’ experiences over time, tracing how and as whom they come to appear within the school—and what conditions make such appearances (im)possible.

Educational Terrain: RÉPAQ Communities

There are approximately 50 registered alternative public schools in Québec, all united under the *Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec* (RÉPAQ, 2026). At their core, these schools share a common purpose: to build and sustain a sense of community (Daoust et al., submitted; Dostie, 2020; Chaubet et al., 2024). While educational approaches differ from one school to the next, these schools are not simply alternative in their institutional structure, but in how they organize the shared life of educating and learning. They embrace a philosophy in which students take responsibility for their own learning in environments that foster curiosity, independence, and a deep sense of ownership. Teachers and parents work in partnership within RÉPAQ educational communities, sustaining conditions in which students’ autonomy and innate appetite for learning can unfold through project based explorations.

While practices differ from school to school, parent members of the broader RÉPAQ community are asked to play an integral role in the alternative school; they are asked to actively participate in the school's stories, reflections, actions, and decisions. The French terms *cogestion* and *coéducation*, as used by RÉPAQ, describe the forms of participation parents assume when enrolling their children in these schools. While English does not offer precise equivalents for these French terms, they can be aligned with concepts such as co-management, co-production, and perhaps even co-gestation (*cogestion*), as well as co-learning/educating (*coéducation*). Yet, even within RÉPAQ—where these terms are frequently invoked—their meanings, boundaries, and implications for practice remain neither clearly defined nor commonly shared. As a result, how these ideas are taken up, interpreted, and lived varies considerably across individuals and school contexts. It is within this broader context that this narrative inquiry takes place, in the lived experiences of four parents at Mockingbird Elementary School.

Situating the Study: Mockingbird Elementary School

What distinguishes Mockingbird from other alternative public schools in Québec is its requirement that parents commit to a sustained, physical presence within the school. This commitment enacts the very first lines written in their *blue booklet*: “choosing Mockingbird is to adopt a lifestyle oriented around participation in a community and an alternative pedagogy. It is about receiving the key to a school as a way to accompany children of the whole community along their learning journey” (Mockingbird, 2024, translated from French by the first author). On designated days each week, parents participate in project spaces, working alongside children in small, multi-age groups from initial conception through to collective realization. Parents are responsible for the “principal means to realization, of creation, and learning development of the child” (Mockingbird, 2024, translated from French by the first author). They are not peripheral supporters of schooling but are structurally embedded within the pedagogical life of the school; their presence becomes a condition of how projects unfold—shaping the pace, direction, and relational dynamics of learning.

I conducted a narrative inquiry study (2024-2026) alongside community members of Mockingbird. The study centres on four parents—Claire, William, Annie, and Mia—who chose to enrol their families at this school. Mia has four children, three of whom attend Mockingbird (2025-2026), with her eldest now attending an alternative high school located in the same building. Annie accompanied three daughters at Mockingbird for thirteen consecutive years,

concluding her involvement in the 2025-2026 school year. William has three children, two of whom currently attend Mockingbird, while his eldest previously attended an alternative elementary school and is now in high school. Claire, a parent of two children at Mockingbird, is herself a former student of the same school.

I spent time alongside research participants across the school—within classrooms, hallways, and shared project spaces, often in the presence of their children—observing, conversing, and participating in the everyday rhythms of school life. Field texts were co-composed with each parent through these encounters, attending to moments of the unfolding of life within the educational community. Guided by relational ethics (Clandinin et al., 2018), I co-inquired into our shared and complex experiences of appearing within the life of Mockingbird. I, too, was part of this temporal and place-based unfolding—as a narrative inquirer, educator, and parent whose children will soon enter the school system. As I came to live these experiences alongside participants, Hannah Arendt’s thinking on appearance, plurality, and the conditions of a shared world began to offer a language through which to make sense of what was unfolding—over time, in place, and in relation.

Thinking with Arendt: Spaces of Appearance

Hannah Arendt’s notion of spaces of appearance offers a way to think with what it means for parents to appear, and how they come into view within the institutional life of Mockingbird. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt describes human life as unfolding across distinct realms, each shaping the conditions under which individuals come into view. The private sphere is the realm of necessity, where the labor of sustaining life takes place and where intimacy and biological needs are attended to. The public sphere, by contrast, is the space of appearance proper: a world held in common—not a backdrop, but the in-between space that both relates and separates people, where individuals step forward before others through action and speech, disclosing themselves as distinct and irreducible human beings. It is in this space, among others, that plurality becomes visible and political life becomes possible.

Arendt also identified a third sphere of life: the *social*. Emerging historically with the erosion of the boundary between the household (*oikos*) and the public realm (*polis*), the social renders aspects of private life publicly visible without taking on the character of political action in the public realm. As Arendt (1958) wrote, the social is “a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political forms in the

nation-state” (p. 28). When the social expands unchecked, as Arendt cautioned, it risks eclipsing both the intimacy of the private and the plurality of the public, replacing a shared world with the administration of life itself.

Schools closely resemble the social sphere that Arendt approached with such ambivalence. They gather the private worlds of families—parents’ and children’s histories, vulnerabilities, desires, and capacities—into a shared institutional space already shaped by pedagogical conventions, bureaucratic hierarchies, and political agendas. In doing so, schools neither simply extend the household nor fully constitute the public realm as Arendt understood it—a space of *liberté* where action and speech among equals can appear. Rather, schools exist in a tense and unstable in-between: a negotiated space in which private life becomes visible without necessarily becoming political. In such spaces, the boundary between private and public must be continually judged, held, and re-made rather than procedurally enforced.

Judgement, in this in-between space, is inseparable from the relational conditions that make appearance possible in the first place. In such conditions, spaces of appearance become fragile relational achievements: individuals ought to grant one another sufficient distance to appear as who they uniquely are, without collapsing into sameness or retreating into withdrawal. Otherwise, appearance risks becoming tied to social legibility. For Arendt, this work of discernment is never merely procedural but ethical and relational. A world becomes humane insofar as people can act and be acted upon, speak and be addressed, and initiate something new while remaining shaped by what already exists. The central question then is not simply whether parents appear within the life of the school, but *how*—and as *whom*—they appear.

School Selection Process: Appearance as Summoned

In the opening of this paper, I began with a field text of attending an initial information session at an alternative school, a moment that marks an important moment of the schools’ selection process. In many RÉPAQ schools, attendance at this session is mandatory; parents who do not attend are removed from consideration entirely. Rather than functioning as an invitation, this requirement establishes a condition of appearance, determining who can become visible to the school before any relationship can take shape. For Arendt, appearance here does not arise through action and speech among equals but is structured in advance by institutional conditions that determine who can step forward. This takes place at the outset of the academic year, well before formal enrollment decisions are typically made elsewhere. Interestingly, information

about alternative schools was not readily available nor systematically communicated through publicly visible channels, instead information often circulated only through informal conversations, social networks, and prior affiliations. These temporal and social discrepancies quietly presume that families are already oriented towards their children's schooling far in advance and already aware of such schools—conditions that shape who appears before and eventually within the school.

When I asked Mia, a mother with four children at Mockingbird, how she first heard about Mockingbird, she described being approached by someone affiliated with the school who had observed her as a parent in a different setting and suggested that she might “fit” well within the community. Her presence was rendered legitimate through an informal act of observation that anticipated who she was, even before she had actively sought entry. This moment of selection is not neutral: how parents appear at this threshold—confidently, tentatively, or not at all—shapes who becomes visible to the school from the outset.

For Annie and Jason, this summons into appearance was more formal.

Despite working full-time and expecting their third child, Annie and Jason still decided to signal their interest in the school. They were invited for the interview, a pivotal moment designed not to assess children, but to call the parents themselves into view. As Annie recounted, the school administrator looked at them and asked: “Are you ready to commit for the next seven years? We are not looking for parents who want to try this out.” Annie remembered her response. Gesturing towards her belly, she replied: “Actually, with this, it’s thirteen years”. She told me that she had done the math long before walking into that room. Her answer was not offered as reassurance or persuasion, but as an articulation of how she understood herself in that moment—what she was prepared to stand behind.

(Researcher's Journal Entry, March 2025)

Annie, who has now spent thirteen consecutive years at Mockingbird, still remembers the initial interview as a moment of *demanded* appearance—one in which parents were required to step forward and speak for themselves—their dispositions and ways of being quietly placed under scrutiny before participation had even begun.

Early moments of appearance did not remain confined to the selection process; they continued to shape how Annie and her family understood what was possible in relation to the school. As she later explained,

You see, we never moved because we didn't want to leave the school. We didn't move earlier because we couldn't have managed the commute for one. It just wouldn't have been doable. Now we'll handle it for five weeks, but the school grounded us so deeply that we chose not to move. That's really what it comes down to.

(Research Conversation, May 2025)

Appearance, once summoned, becomes a condition that carries forward—orienting participation long before it begins and continuing to shape families' relationships to Mockingbird over time.

School Projects: Appearance as Lived

You know, here I can be who I am, and you can take the place you want in the school. Some parents come in with these beautifully organized projects, and others are quieter, more spontaneous. Everyone gets to be who they are. And that, well—that's something special we value at this school.

(Mia, Research Conversation, March 2025)

Mia's reflection suggests that participation in school projects is experienced as more than a pedagogical obligation. Projects hold the potential to function as spaces of appearance—relational spaces in which parents come into view over time, alongside children, teachers, and other families. What is valued is not uniformity, but the possibility of appearing differently: organized or improvised, directive or tentative, confident or quiet.

At the same time, these possibilities are not unbounded. They are shaped by institutional conditions that orient how participation—and appearance—can unfold. As outlined in Mockingbird's *blue booklet*: "While children are the primary learners, adult educators and co-educators are also called to develop within the school. They are expected to embody the school's values in their daily presence, becoming models through how they appear before children" (Mockingbird, 2024, translated from French by first author). This terrain raises further questions: do parents come to appear in ways that fit an unspoken mold, one quietly discerned through interviews, dispositions, and ways of being? And what happens when life stories shift—when motivations change, interests wane, or stories from other spheres of life collide within this space, and the capacity to appear begins to falter? What are the consequences of such shifts?

William, a parent at Mockingbird, described this experience of appearing through a memory that has stayed with him:

We talk about the concept of co-education in these schools. The teacher is there, yes, but the parent too. We have access to the classroom at any time. My favourite memory would have to be at the other school—I used to give presentations to the entire group. I gave them the way I was taught too, from when I was a kid. I don't even remember what they were about anymore. But it was interesting because yes, your own kid is there, but actually, you are there for the group. They all listened to me, you know? I was happy.

(Research Conversation, March 2025)

Although this story comes from William's experience in another alternative school, the fact that he no longer remembers the presentation itself is telling. What endures is not the *what* of his appearance, but the *who*: the happiness of being seen, listened to, and addressed by others. As Arendt (1958) noted, it is this disclosure of *who* one is—the *persona*, appearing in the presence of others—that gives durability to a shared world.

Within Mockingbird, such moments are not incidental. Among the eight values that orient life in the school, respect is named first: "Ability to show consideration for the social and physical environment, to treat others with civility and kindness and to take into account one's own needs and limitations" (Mockingbird, 2024, translated from French by first author). As the school further notes, "whether during group speeches, in conflict resolution situations or in any other context, the [person] learns to listen openly to the points of view of others, even when they differ from [their] own" (p. 15). In these moments, appearing and listening hold together.

Annie's stories further illuminate how projects function as spaces of appearance through judgement and care. She described her participation through a metaphor: "We're like locomotives, us parents—pulling the project along, making sure everyone's on board. Guardrails up so no one falls into the gaps. I'm not here just to be here. I'm here because I believe learning happens through doing" (Research Conversation, March, 2025). This metaphor reveals not only Annie's pedagogical stance, but a particular way of appearing: moving with others, holding space, and exercising ongoing judgment—attending to others, responding to what was unfolding, and deciding in the moment without the shelter of fixed rules.

Such ways of appearing are not unbounded. They are held within conditions that orient how parents come to be with others in the school. As outlined in Mockingbird's blue booklet: the rules of life revolve around respect: others and my personhood, the operational organization and its safety, equipment and environment; my responsibilities and rights.

When interventions are deemed necessary, our intervention beacons focus on respect, inclusion, discussion and participation of the child in the (re)search for solutions.

(Mockingbird, 2024, translated from French by first author)

Within this horizon, ways of appearing become both possible and are accountable to others. Annie's presence discloses who she is, shaped by life stories, habits, and commitments she carries into the shared work of the project. When I asked how children choose which projects to join, Annie replied without hesitation:

Kids choose the parent. My kids choose their projects based on the parent they want to work with. We sometimes get the same ones because they want to be around us. I'm really structured. I apply what the teachers are teaching. I see the content when I'm doing homework with my children and then I bring that into the project.

(Research Conversation, April 2025)

Children, then, are not simply choosing a topic or activity; they are choosing a way of being with the others. Projects become sites where ways of appearing are not only enacted but taken up by others. As Annie emphasized, this offers children "the whole apple—a full 360 degrees" of how a common world might appear (Research Conversation, March, 2025).

One project began, as many do at this school, without a predefined plan. She hung material from the ceiling, laid out assorted objects, and invited the children to explore with the idea of balance. Oscar struggled; every attempt tipped, slipped, or fell apart. Mickaël, by contrast, moved effortlessly through each station, completing every challenge with ease. Annie found herself improvising—extending Mickaël's engagement while trying to support Oscar's persistent frustration.

The project expanded into a series of explorations: slacklining, yoga, reading about Calder, watching videos, studying mobiles—each offering a different way of encountering balance. Then something shifted. Oscar suddenly "lit up". Calder's sculptures opened a conceptual doorway. He began imagining possibilities and offering explanations with confidence. Meanwhile, Mickaël, once so sure, now appeared lost.

When it came time to create the final mobiles, Mickaël built a simple structure of three brown wooden planks—functional and spare. Oscar constructed a golden tree of tissue

paper, leaves cascading, lime yellow accents, each element imbued with intention. He explained every detail to the group, and the other children listened.

(Researcher's Journal Entry, April 2025)

Lingering with this field text, my thoughts carry me to how Arendt (1958) conceptualized plurality as “the condition of human action,” grounded in the fact that “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (p. 8). What becomes visible in Annie’s project story is not simply divergence or dissonance in ways of appearing between children; rather, plurality is lived in and through the unfolding of the projects—Oscar’s repeated falling, Mickaël’s initial ease, and the unexpected reversal that follows mark distinct ways of being and becoming in relation to others, the content and materials, and the environment. Such moments told and lived by Annie require what Arendt (1968) later described as a form of selflessness, “or rather the question of openness to others, which in fact is the precondition for ‘humanity’ in every sense of the word” (p. 15). Annie’s way of accompanying the project can be read as this openness in practice.

Reflecting on this story in a later conversation, she said: “This is it—this is why we do this. Same theme, completely different expressions” (Research Conversation, April 2025). Togetherness here is not grounded in sameness, but in the coexistence of difference within a shared project. For parents at Mockingbird, parental participation is not supplementary to children’s learning; it becomes part of the conditions under which learning can unfold. In appearing alongside children, parents do not simply participate—they begin, at times, to enact plurality and a shared sense of belonging.

Not all appearances, however, are held with the same ease. Claire, a parent and former student of Mockingbird, described moments when appearance slipped from plurality:

I personally heard some negative comments because parents were too much at school, you know? When you do a bit more, it is perceived by others like “ah, now I appear to be boring because my projects are not like hers”. I will give you an example. Yesterday we did a lollipop/candy project with my daughter. This was the second time we did the project because we had done it last year with our son. It went really well so we did it again this year, plus, we already had all the material. And this morning, two mothers

came to see me and told me something like: “Ah it was really cool your project, how are you able to do that? Do you work?”

(Research Conversation, December 2025)

Claire’s story marks a subtle but consequential shift. Here, appearance no longer unfolds through action and speech among equals, but within a social register shaped by comparison and normalization—what I understand as social legibility.

Thinking alongside Arendt, visibility alone does not constitute appearance. Individuals may become visible, yet remain subject to comparison and governance, as modern conditions have rendered increasingly fragile the division between private and public realms— “between the sphere of the polis and the sphere of household and family, and, finally between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life, a division upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic” (Arendt, 1958, p. 28). Within this blurring, appearance risks becoming legible rather than plural. What is at stake is not simply whether parents appear, but *how*—and as *whom*—they come to appear within a shared world. Here, judgement takes shape not as a formal procedure based on expectations, rules, and responsibilities, but as an ethical practice through which plurality is sustained, or foreclosed.

Assessment: Appearance in the In-Between of Private and Public

Evaluation at Mockingbird takes the form of a qualitative developmental portrait composed through conversations among parents, teachers, and children. As William described his experience of participating in his children’s evaluation, “here, children are given the space to speak of themselves. They learn to see their own strengths, to notice the places where they want to grow” (Research Conversation, March 2025). Assessment, in this sense, becomes a space of appearance—an encounter in which children and parents are called into relation—through speaking, listening, and responding to one another.

Such moments do not unfold within a single and stable terrain. Instead, they take place in an in-between space where private and public lives meet without collapsing into one another. In William’s stories, assessment brought into view two versions of his son: “At home, I witness my son as an extrovert—lively and always talking. Yet at school I sometimes see him fold into himself, becoming quiet, reserved” (Research Conversation, March 2025). Rather than resolving these differences, assessment invites parents to hold both images together—across private and public spheres—without reducing one to the other. What emerges is not a verdict but a shared

attempt to understand how a child appears across different contexts and relationships. As William further explained:

My perspective joins with the teacher's, but also the child, and together we shape a picture that is more complete, more real, you know? I have things that I can bring to the table as well as the teacher. The kid's profile thus becomes more realistic, and we know where to go from there.

(Research Conversation, March 2025)

While William's story centers on holding different images of the child, Claire draws attention to how appearance itself is learned through dialogue. During her son's semester conversation, she noticed how the teacher turned to him first, asking: *Who are your friends? What do you enjoy doing here? What are you proud of? What do you find challenging?* Reflecting on this moment, Claire shared:

For us, as parents, it is deeply meaningful simply to observe this. To watch how he engages with her, how his body language shifts, how his words reveal both what he knows of himself and what he is still discovering.

(Research Conversation, April 2025)

Conversational spaces invite the child to appear as a participant in the evaluation rather than an object of assessment. In these moments, the child is positioned as someone who can speak, reflect, and is in relation with others; thus, suggesting a form of agency that is relationally constituted. Judgment, here, does not function as comparison or ranking. It takes shape as the careful work of holding multiple ways of seeing the child in relation to the different spheres of life.

Arendt offered an image that helps illuminate what might be happening: people gathered around a table, speaking not about themselves, but about the world that lies between them. The table, she wrote, "the world, like every in-between, relates and separates [them] at the same time" (p. 52)—holding people together while preserving the distance necessary for each to see the world from their own position. This world-between is the condition of action. In this microworld of assessment, the child becomes the shared concern placed between them. The child appears differently to each—through the teacher's professional judgment, the parent's intimate knowledge of life beyond school, and the child's own emerging self-understanding. Assessment, then, becomes a practice of collective care: holding multiple perspectives together in dialogue.

At the same time, such spaces are not neutral. The invitation to appear is shaped by the conditions of the conversation itself: by the questions asked, the expectations held, and the forms of expression that are recognized and valued. What may appear as inclusion can also carry a certain performativity, where ways of appearing are, to some extent, already anticipated. The individual's agency is constantly negotiated within the limits of what can be said, shown, and taken up in relation. These moments raise important questions: How long can such spaces of appearance be sustained within institutional life? Whose ways of speaking, judging, and appearing are readily taken up as legitimate, and whose require greater effort to be held? What happens when the conditions that invite plurality to be sustained begin to erode into sameness?

Contemplating Spaces of Appearance

Claire, reflecting on her years as a former student at Mockingbird, described how early experiences of being addressed and taken seriously continue to shape how she appears in the world:

Even at a young age, you learn that your voice matters. That way of valuing kids really stayed with me from when I was a student at this school. Even now, at work, when I'm with the president of the company, I know there is space to disagree, to share my point of view, to enter into conversation, in dialogue, you know?

(Research Conversation, April 2025)

Claire's account showed how her ways of appearing—learned in projects alongside her family, in dialogue, and in community—extend across time, beyond the school itself. What is cultivated in these spaces is *an enduring capacity to appear*: to speak, to disagree, and to take responsibility for one's presence and perspective in relation to others. In this way, institutional practices such as assessment at Mockingbird do not end within the school, as they are carried forward in how individuals come to understand themselves in relation to others and the common world they inhabit.

What is carried forward, however, relies on a relational *in-between* space. As Arendt (1958) wrote, “for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the “web” of human [and more-than-human] relationships,” (p. 183). This in-between is neither given nor secure; it must be continually sustained. Arendt (1958) reminded us that no human life is possible without a world that testifies to the presence of others—“not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness” (p. 22). For

Arendt (1958), to act and to speak, conditions of what it is to be human, is not simply to participate, but to insert oneself into a shared *world*. As she further wrote: “[a]ction alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (p. 23). Action, in this sense, is a relational endeavour: it depends upon the presence of others before whom one may appear, and through whom the fragile conditions of plurality are sustained.

Thinking with Arendt alongside this educational community, I recall,

In that moment, Claire’s voice returned to me. From my time living alongside her and her stories, I often felt there was a kind a quiet searching—where parents had to learn how to care for children from the ways they had once been cared for, or their perceived absence of care, and their imagined care for children.

(Researchers Journal Entry, April 2025)

What this searching makes visible is the work of learning *how* to be in relation with others—*how* to take up responsibility for one’s presence within a shared educational world. Questions remain about how care is taken up within institutional life—how much care is possible, how it is recognized, and how it may differ from care as it is lived in private or in other public spaces of appearance.

Schools such as Mockingbird occupy a fragile *in-between*, where family and private lives are rendered visible without fully becoming public. Parents are invited into these spaces of appearance, yet their participation is shaped by the conditions that make it possible to come before one another. In moments of selection, parents are called to appear in ways that anticipate commitment, time, and particular ways of being. In project work alongside children, appearance depends on sustained presence, where the capacity to appear—and the ways of being seen and valued within the school—shape *who* remains visible and *how*. In assessment, appearance is negotiated within a delicate space where private understandings are made shareable yet remain bounded by what can be recognized—and negotiated—within the institutional sphere.

Thinking alongside Arendt (1958), the possibility of appearing in spaces such as Mockingbird is grounded in deep institutional structures shaped by historical, political, linguistic, and colonial systems. This becomes visible when inquiring into the expectations, norms and forms of participation, and contemplating what counts as legitimate ways of being *present*. What is often described as inclusive and participatory reveals itself, instead, as a restrictive

architecture: while plurality is invited, it is held within conditions that narrow it. To appear requires being invited, selected, and committed to the community's public spaces and its continuous work—ongoing, demanding, and unevenly distributed.

Implications

Insights emerge from an inquiry into the experiences of parents in the educational community of Mockingbird, a publicly funded alternative school in Québec, Canada (Daoust, 2026). Through diverse narrative inquiry field texts, I attended to the complexity, and at times, tensions, of how parents are selected and are required to participate. There are processes that sit at the heart of educational communities such as Mockingbird, that create possibilities and tensions. It is critical to trace the conditions that make appearance possible within this space, while also showing how these same conditions may work to limit it. As commitments shift, as life circumstances unfold, and as ways of educating and learning are reworked, the capacity to appear does not remain stable. It becomes fragile. At times, it is strained. At other times, it is no longer possible in the ways once imagined. This raises questions not only of who is able to become and remain visible, but at what cost, and as whom one is able to appear within these spaces.

Arendt (1958) enables this tension to come into sharper focus in thinking about educational communities. Appearance is never an individual act but a relational and political event—one that requires a space where plurality can be sustained. Her concept of spaces of appearance helped to trace *how* and *as whom* parents come to appear within the institutional life of schooling. In this way, community is not a stable or inherently inclusive good; it is a political accomplishment, continually negotiated and sustained through action, speech, and judgment. In this sense, thinking alongside Arendt unsettles the “feel-good” narrative often associated with participatory school communities. It draws attention to how spaces of appearance are always circumscribed—shaped by implicit norms of commitment, availability, and recognizable ways of being that invite some forms of participation while constraining others.

In this light, these alternative schools can be understood not simply as inclusive or democratic spaces, but as sites where particular versions of community are produced and maintained—where the invitation to appear is already oriented towards those able to meet its demands. To appear here is not neutral; it is to enter into an already constituted space that both enables and disciplines how one comes forward. This way of appearing is bound to what Arendt

calls the common world—that which lies between people, relating and separating them at once. As participants come to appear within these spaces, they are also called to remain in dialogue around this shared, yet never settled, world.

Concluding Remarks

Through carefully attending to parent's experiences within alternative school settings, it becomes visible that the conditions of appearance in such educational communities are not achieved through consensus or cohesion, but through an ongoing willingness to remain with plurality: to exercise judgment, and to listen, speak, and respond to one another without foreclosing the possibility of other ways of appearing. Rather than offering closure, this paper leaves a further question: *How do people continue to live together when appearing before one another unfolds within an intangible in-between, and when the world that both relates and separates them remains fragile and contested?*

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Interlude Three: A Moment of *Accalmie*

April 22, 2026

Dear Reader,

The last lines of Paper 2 are still fresh in my mind. I clearly remember them as not offering closure but rather, leaving me with a burning question: *How do people continue to live together when appearing before one another unfolds within an intangible in-between, and when the world that both relates and separates them remains fragile and contested?* This question continues to move me—yet, suddenly piercing as I sit down to write. I have struggled to find the correct, the right, the *exact* words that might name what this question holds for me and for the work I am committed to unraveling. I am propelled to circle it: erasing; removing, replacing, adding; rewriting, rehashing, and rebuilding—an *endurance* of never quite arriving. And yet, in this moment of perplexity, something shifts—I find myself in *accalmie*.

Whatever alphabet, words, or intonations I choose to express my enduring wonder about relationships, I remain conscious that meaning will always exceed them. To that effect, in my scattered notes for *Interlude Three* before introducing *Chapter Nine: Paper 3*, I had initially imagined that the last lines of *Chapter Eight: Paper 2* would be: *Attending to such moments invites further inquiry into what becomes of relationships—and of possibilities for appearing with others—when distances that make plurality possible begin to erode within this hybridity, this in-between space of one's private and public life.* I remember feeling that, at that time, this formulation felt precise—it felt *right*. I wonder: when did I decide that this iteration was not the one to send to committee members or to peer-reviewed journals?

To recenter my racing thoughts, I turn towards the beautiful words of Cynthia Chambers. In 1994, she wrote:

Stories¹ are about interconnections—connections between my life and someone else's; between the past and present; between the stories of our lives and the stories of our teaching; between the larger narratives of a culture and the smaller narratives that make up a life. These connections make up stories our lives tell. (p. 40)

As I type these words, across the numerous iterations of the stories I am retelling and reliving, my eyes drift towards the window of my office. Spring air sweeps gently inwards, and a subtle

sense of renewal settles around me. Captivated by the sound of birds—urging me to walk, to pause, to slow down—I find myself rereading the fluorescent green rectangular *post-it* in the lower left corner of the window, the only one there; the other ones are scattered everywhere else. This insistent *post-it* reads: *How do I live relational ethics in a way that does not compromise my roles and responsibility to Mockingbird?* Below this question are two star-circled bullet points. The first reads: I can finish the paper introducing Arendtian friendship. The second: this all resonates with Indigenous wisdom.

Melissa

¹Notation written on April 28, 2026 (Sam visited her future school today.)

As I reread this letter, a song by Gary Allan returns softly through my headphones—one I listened to with my mother as a child. Its final lines stay with me:

No, life ain't always beautiful

But, I know I'll be fine

Hey, life ain't always beautiful, but it's a beautiful ride

What a beautiful ride

Stories have always existed. Some are pushed to the margins; some are reimagined; others renewed. I am left bewildered by what it means to carry them—how we live them, how they live us, how they come to matter in relation.

It is, indeed, a beautiful ride.

Chapter Nine: Paper 3

Title: Living relational ethics as a narrative inquirer: Considerations on friendship

Potential Journal: Qualitative Inquiry

Word Count (excluding references): 6104 words

Abstract: This paper emerges from a narrative inquiry alongside parents at Mockingbird Elementary School, an alternative public school in Québec, Canada. Drawing on moments alongside Mia, a parent, co-educator, and research participant, I attend to how relational ethics is lived, negotiated, and at times unsettled in the midst of school life. Situated within narrative inquiry, relational ethics is understood as an ongoing ethical commitment emerging within relationships, rather than a set of principles to be applied. I consider how friendship, as an ethical terrain, opens possibilities for thinking about what it means to live relational ethics within and beyond institutional spaces.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry; Relational Ethics; Researcher; Teacher; Identity

Description of Author: Melissa Daoust is a narrative inquirer whose work explores lived experiences within educational communities. Drawing on philosophy of education and curriculum studies, her research attends to relational ethics, alternative public schooling, and how teachers, families, and communities learn to live well together in relation to one another and the places they inhabit.

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Living relational ethics as a narrative inquirer: Considerations on friendship

This relationship—ours—is teaching me that to inquire narratively is to live ethically in the in-between. I wonder whether “in-between” is the right word. What words might hold the experience of dwelling in the beauty and ache of relational entanglement? (in letter correspondence with Mia¹, May 2025)

I return to this fragment of a letter I wrote alongside Mia, a parent, co-educator, and research participant at Mockingbird, an alternative public school in Québec, Canada. What began as a narrative inquiry alongside parents, who are central figures to the Mockingbird’s philosophy and ways of educating and knowing, slowly drew me towards wondering about the relational complexities that emerge between researcher and research participant, particularly when relationships begin to extend beyond the formal boundaries of institutional spaces.

Mockingbird is part of the *Réseau des Écoles Publiques Alternatives du Québec* ([RÉPAQ](#)), a network of publicly funded alternative schools in Québec, Canada, where education is imagined as a collective and relational practice. Across RÉPAQ schools, children learn through student-centred, project-based explorations sustained not only by teachers, but also by families and the broader community. At Mockingbird, more particularly, parents are responsible for the “principal means to realization, of creation, and learning development of the child” (Mockingbird, 2024; translated from French by author). Thinking with Clandinin et al.’s (2018) work on the dimensions of relational ethics in narrative inquiry, I attend to how living alongside Mia invited me to move slowly, to listen differently, and to dwell within uncertainty and not knowing. Over time, I became increasingly wakeful to the ongoingness of experience and attentive to moments of silence, contemplation, imagination, and playfulness that shaped our relationship as it unfolded across school, community, and everyday life. My experiences in living this narrative inquiry study called me to consider ideas of friendship by Hannah Arendt.

Entering the Ethical Terrain from Mother to Narrative Inquirer

I first came to a school affiliated with RÉPAQ as a mother, during an open-house event, wondering whether this might be a place for our family. I was in the early stages of finding my place: as a parent whose eldest child was preparing to enter the school system, and as an educator and narrative inquirer who lives within schools and imagines what could be *otherwise* (Greene,

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the identities of the school and research participant.

1995). My curiosity following my first visit of a RÉPAQ school as a mother guided me towards learning more about the educational spaces and the communities that sustain them. It was really difficult to imagine, let alone design, a study situated within a context that I barely knew; hence, shortly after, I returned as a substitute teacher and volunteer across several RÉPAQ-affiliated spaces, stepping into classrooms, school corners, and community and administrative events. Something within these schools called to me, inviting a closer look, a slower, more relational way of coming to *know*.

From the moment I first stepped into Mockingbird, something shifted. I sensed—though I could not yet name it—that this might be where this narrative inquiry would take place: within this community of parents, and within the stories they live, tell, and carry forward. It was not a moment of clarity, but of *attunement*—a turning towards the relationships, places, and stories already unfolding around me. As Clandinin (2023) reminds us, narrative inquiry is a way of being in relation: “Narrative inquirers begin in relationship, live in relationship, and leave in relationship” (p. 43). Engaging in narrative inquiry, as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1990), offered a way forward—not as a method to be applied, but as an invitation to begin in relationship with those living within these spaces and places.

I linger with Schutz’s (1967) notion of wide-awakeness as a “plane of consciousness of highest tension,” grounded in a full attentiveness to life and its requirements (p. 213). To be wide-awake, as I am coming to understand it, is not to arrive at certainty, but to remain with what is unfolding—to notice, to question, and to resist closing too quickly. In this way, wide-awakeness becomes a relational practice of coming alongside. It asks me to stay with the incompleteness of my own understanding, to hold multiple perspectives, and to remain open to what might come to matter as the relationship with research participants emerged (Greene, 1977; Clandinin et al., 2018, p. 10).

Indeed, narrative inquiry cannot be separated from relationship. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “Relationship lives at the heart of thinking narratively. Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do” (p. 187). From this understanding, ethical concerns are not supplementary to the research process; they are lived as what Clandinin and Caine (2013) referred to as relational responsibilities, constituting the research itself. While institutional requirements such as anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent remain necessary, they do not account for the ethical demands that emerge in the midst of *relationally living alongside*

research participants. Narrative inquirers must therefore attend to ethical matters that exceed procedural guidelines and arise within relationships as they are lived. When Clandinin and Caine (2013) outlined twelve touchstones for judging the quality of narrative inquiries, they position *relational responsibility* as foundational, describing inquiry spaces as “spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants; spaces that are marked always by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care” (p. 169). To take up this touchstone is to recognize that ethical responsibility cannot be resolved in advance. It is lived in the ongoing *negotiation* of relationships—where tensions, uncertainties, and complexities come into view. As they further noted, such responsibility calls for attentiveness, presence, and response, “marked by a process of self-reflection, contemplation, openness, and uncertainty” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 169). Those tensions are not new. In 1990, Connelly and Clandinin attended to ethics in narrative inquiry drawing most heavily on Nodding’s (1984) work, in particular, they pointed towards “the negotiation of entry” as highlighting “the way narrative inquiry occurs within relationships among researchers and practitioners, constructed as a caring community” (p. 4). Negotiations of entry into the field, ongoing presence, the co-composition of texts, and eventual leave-taking are all moments where ethical commitments must be lived out rather than merely stated.

Sometime in the 2024-2025 school year, during one of the teachers’ Wednesday afternoon meetings at Mockingbird, I was invited to share the contours and colors of my proposed study and how I envisioned engaging with parents as research participants. When I finished speaking, one teacher glanced towards a colleague with a knowing look and said, with a kind of certainty that surprised me: “Mia will definitely agree—she is the ideal *participant*” (Field Text in Melissa’s Research Journal, 2024). That brief remark marked more than an invitation to a potential participant; it opened a space of relational entanglement.

Introducing Mia

Mia is the mother of four children who have each, in their own time and rhythm, passed through the halls of Mockingbird. Maverick, the eldest, now moves through his years of high school (2025-2026), still sharing a building with his younger siblings—an overlapping of worlds that feels distinctly Mockingbird. Devin, spirited and endlessly energetic, is in grade six. Everlee, bright and curious, is finding her footing in grade four, exploring the school with a quiet

confidence. And Darius, the youngest, has just begun grade one (2025-2026), entering Mockingbird with the natural ease of a child already born into its fabric.

As I reminisce on Mia's stories alongside her children, I am drawn to another remark another teacher added at the Wednesday-afternoon teacher-meeting: "She is always at school," (Field Text in Melissa's Research Journal, 2024). By training Mia is an early childhood educator, yet she is something distinct here at Mockingbird, something I noticed to be more intimate, more porous. She lives alongside her children's school days. A stay-at-home mom, perhaps, but truly, a stay-at-school mom. In a conversation, Mia shared a story about her presence at school, which I jotted down in my research journal:

It's the life we chose: a narrow townhouse, walls close, warm, no grand vacations, only the quiet abundance of enough. The six of us held together, in a shared breath. The morning after my son was born, I was already back at school; my newborn wrapped against my chest, the others waiting for us at the far side of the hallway. They came with me, wandering through projects, slept curled against me; growing up inside the clouds of chalk dust, glue sticks—laughter. I breastfed between projects, between spaces. Their playgrounds were the scraps of cardboard, wool, and wood we used—we were making. Teachers steady their first steps now call them their students. My son, one day old, was held gently in her arms, and those same hands will guide him through math, through reading, through becoming. (Researcher's Journal Entry, March 2025)

As I linger with this moment, I am reminded of Mia's voice as she speaks to the complexity of living as a parent, *co-participant*, and co-educator in her children's school stories. At Mockingbird, parents are required to maintain a sustained, physical presence within the school, participating alongside teachers and children in the everyday work of education. Within this terrain, roles do not hold still. They are taken up, negotiated, and at times unsettled, as parents live simultaneously as caregivers, educators, and community members.

Co-Composing a Marginal Note Alongside Mia

*As if no line was ever drawn—
between home and school,
teacher and friend,
family and kin.*

School becomes home.

Home becomes school.

I wrote this field text in the margins of a conversation with Mia after she expressed: “If there’s one thing to remember, Mockingbird is my family” (March, 2025). This way of inhabiting this space alongside her children and others—and referring to it in this manner—remained constant throughout my time alongside her. Being alongside Mia as she moves and lives within institutional spaces such as Mockingbird, I often found myself in moments of perplexity (Addams, 1903). This way of inhabiting this landscape felt unfamiliar to me. For much of my life, schooling was organized around a clear separation between personal and familial life and institutional realms—a line that rarely needed to be named in order to be felt. Mia’s stories prompted a set of wonderings: *Why was that boundary drawn in the first place? Who drew it? How did it come to feel so self-evident? And what becomes (im)possible when it begins to blur?* As I sit with these questions, I am drawn to the relational ethics of *moving slowly* in the commitment to listening and living. Clandinin et al. (2018) described this as a call to “listen not only to the stories being told but also to the stories not told, to listen to the stories being lived but also to the stories that create narrative contexts for our lives” (p. 11). This kind of listening asks something of how I enter into relationship—an attentiveness to what is present, what is withheld, and what is still lingering, subtly unfolding, and perhaps, living in the margins.

Many narrative inquirers return, over time, to the multiplicity of their own worlds (Lugones, 1987), attending to who we are and are becoming alongside research participants. This practice of slowing down calls me to linger within ordinariness of my being—in the midst of my life as a mother and in my work as an educator and narrative inquirer. Attending to this multiplicity throughout my time alongside Mia, I am reminded of Chambers’s (1994) description of a “nomadic schizoid...a multiplicity of subjectivities that cannot be captured by any one single identity” (p. 25). Resisting the urge to settle into the categories institutional spaces often seek in place, I begin to retell and relive my commitments to relational ethics in practice.

Thinking with this multiplicity of who I am and am becoming alongside Mia, I am drawn to how she continually asserted her own positioning at Mockingbird. She would often say, “I know my child. I know him best. I am his mother. I know what he needs, you know?” (March, 2025). In a school where this knowledge is explicitly valued, there were nonetheless moments when it was redirected within pedagogical commitments and boundaries intended to support her

son's academic achievement and development. At times, Mia would experience tension between how she understood herself as a mother, what she knew her children needed, and how she was expected to be within the institutional landscape of schools. One moment, in particular, has stayed with me:

Because at lunchtime, I used to keep him with me. I'm here—I want to spend time with my kids. I don't mind if they stay with me a little longer after lunch. But the teacher would gently insist, telling my son, 'You need to go outside and play with the other kids, you need to get used to it.' Eight hours is a long time for a little boy. I understand why she says that, I really do. But still, this is an alternative school. Parents choose to be here to spend time with their children, to be part of their school. And yet, there are principles, rules almost, that feel... old-fashioned. As if the school sometimes forgets why we are here in the first place. (in conversation with Mia, March 2025)

I encountered a similar moment of tension while I was substituting for her son's teacher during Mia's project period. When her son became upset and began disrupting the group, I hesitated. What was my role in that moment? What was hers? This hesitation revealed the ethical work of being in relation within a space where roles overlap.

In a landscape that intentionally brings parents and educators into close proximity, their stories meet in practice—rarely seamlessly. Attending to these moments demands an ongoing ethical attentiveness: a continual wondering about how to remain in relation when responsibilities are shared, negotiated, and not easily resolved. When I shared moments of uncertainty with Mia, she responded: “Usually the teacher would have stepped in, but it makes me question my ability as his mother... Sometimes teachers take up too much space in our projects. We chose this school because we want to take part in the education of our children, in all of this” (Mia, April 2025). Mia's story offers a way to think with how relationships in this landscape are lived as familial, ethical, professional, and deeply intertwined, where distinctions between parent, educator, and in my case researcher, begin to blur, yet do not disappear.

These moments alongside Mia, as we co-compose stories of her relationships with educators, children, and members of the school community, draw me into an attentiveness to the relational ethics lived within our work and within our relationship. Living alongside her across different spaces of Mockingbird, I became increasingly aware of the relationships unfolding around me and of how my own presence is woven into them. My wonders became oriented

towards: am I aligned more closely with the teachers, the parents, or perhaps the children? Does such a division hold, and if so, what is at stake when I am seen as belonging more to one than the other—and by whom? These are not abstract questions but ones that emerge in the midst of practice, as I grapple with the complexities of inhabiting multiple, shifting roles within this community. I am left with further questionings: how do I live relational ethics in ways that do not compromise my responsibilities to Mockingbird while remaining open to the relationships that call me into being as a researcher? What becomes of relational negotiation alongside Mia—and how might it be written—when it is lived as ongoing, shifting, and already-always in relation to space, place, and time?

Staying Wakeful to the In-Between World

According to Clandinin et al. (2018), relational ethics calls for a temporal wakefulness—an attentiveness not only to what is, but to the ongoingness of lives in the making, as they are shaped across time, place, and relationships (p. 197). Living alongside Mia, I came to know her stories slowly, in fragments, shaped by the places she inhabits, the people she moves with, and the histories she carries. Some stories surfaced in conversations; others emerged quietly over time, within moments that at first seemed ordinary. As our relationships unfolded, I became increasingly aware that this coming to know could not remain confined to the immediacy of our interactions. Mia's stories were never hers alone. They were already-always in relation to broader familial, educational, historical, and social worlds that exceeded what could ever fully be known within the boundaries of inquiry. This coming to know drew me beyond our immediate relationship and into a broader ethical terrain. Clandinin et al. (2018) noted that relational ethics asks narrative inquirers to attend not only mutuality, respect, and reciprocity, but also our responsibilities towards “the worlds in which we are nested” and to the futurities our work helps shape (Clandinin et al., 2018, p. 20). A relational ontology presses me to ask not only who I am in relation with Mia, but who I am within the larger worlds her stories—and ours—are part of.

Thinking with these commitments, I became increasingly attentive to the limits of what can be known, represented, or resolved within inquiry. As Rosiek and Pratt (2013) suggested, inquiry requires “conceptions of inquiry that embrace the pluralism and the reciprocal ethical obligations made manifest by acknowledging the limitations of our representational practices” as an “inevitable and desirable outcome of conducting inquiry” with participants (p. 585). To remain wide-awake in this work, then, is not to arrive at certainty. Rather, it is to remain

attentive to the unfolding nature of experience and to my own implication within these stories, as someone also shaped by the narratives I carry, inherit, and continue to live by.

Drawing from Menon's (2020) work, I understand how lives are composed across intersecting worlds—family, school, community, culture—never singular, never fixed. In coming to know the complexity of Mia's unfolding life, I felt a growing tension: how to hold, with care, the life stories we were co-composing without narrowing their multiplicity. What does it mean to carry stories that are not mine alone, yet entrusted within a wider relational web? It is here that I begin to understand narrative inquiry not only as a methodology, but as a way of being within the world—a study of “people in relation *with* people in relation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189, emphasis added). This carries me to a journal entry I wrote as I lingered with stories emerging in the in-between space:

The wonder of in-between: *the schoolyard hug, the eye contact, the smile, the lingering—the silence—the unplanned phone call, the birthday video, the voice recording—little ones spilling through, mine, yours, ours. I say to them: “Chip, Chocolat, Gomme”; I hear them, children screaming “Peanut”, with a blink of pride. What do we do with these field texts of living in the in-between? How do I write about the making of a relationship—already-always in motion, unfolding, evolving—in this hybridity, outside of the recorded, the scripted, the prescribed? What becomes of these moments of participant and researcher, living in relational symbiosis within the intangible? What stories are woven into dialogue—and what becomes possible in their retelling and reliving, as they are cared for and brought into relation?* (Researcher's Journal Entry, April 2025)

This field text draws me into the subtle, often unrecorded moments where relationship is actually lived—the in-between spaces where boundaries between researcher and participant soften and shift—beginning to blur. These fragments—gestures, silences, shared language—are not peripheral; they are the very sites where relational ethics takes shape. They call me to remain wide-awake to how these moments carry stories that exceed documentation, asking not how to capture them fully, but how to hold and retell them with care, in ways that honor the relationships, spaces, and worlds they emerge from.

Uncertainty of Living in this Closeness

As I attempt to retell the stories you have shared about mothering in this school, something else presses at the edge of my thinking: our relationship. What began within

the formal frame of research has unfolded into something more relational and ethically demanding—a friendship. I think we both sensed this early on. I know how curious you are about the research, and we talked about the methodology guiding this study—narrative inquiry as a relational methodology. You were the first to remark that the methodology itself sounded as though I was intentionally seeking friendship. Your observation stayed with me—not because it was untrue, but because it revealed how you were already reading our relationship. (Researcher’s Journal Entry in conversation with Mia, April 2025)

At the same time, this brings me to another pressing question: what happens as we move from the relational space of co-composing field texts into the solitary—and more public—act of writing final research texts? Clandinin et al. (2018) asked: “When we are no longer physically alongside participants, how do we continue to live relational ethics?” (p. 200). As I grappled with how my presence was taken up, negotiated, and at times unsettled within this community, I became increasingly attentive to how these relationships might be written.

I found myself turning to letter writing as a way to remain in relation. Writing to and alongside Mia, rather than about her, became a methodological and ethical commitment—one that resists distancing and instead sustains the relational threads of our co-composed narrative inquiry. This closeness does not end with physical co-presence; it becomes a responsibility carried in the act of writing itself. It is in the midst of writing—when I am no longer physically alongside Mia—that this tension becomes most palpable:

I find myself wondering what I wanted to write to you eight days ago. I am someone who usually remembers. I tend to remember experiences in their fullness: how they felt as they unfolded, who was there and who lingered at the edges, the tone of voices, the quiet conversations happening alongside the main one. I remember the background—the scent, the art spilling through, the texture of clothing, the hum of sound, the weather, the time of day. These memories often stay with me for years. And yet, eight days ago, while sitting at a writing retreat, immersed in dissertation work, something slipped. I remember the feeling clearly: an urgency, a pull towards writing you another letter. I remember knowing it mattered. I remember sensing that it had something to do with relationship itself. That is the only certainty I can name. What called me then, and what does it carry now? What is this relationship asking of me? Perhaps this not-knowing is not a failure of

memory, but a signal—an opening that has yet to take form, a story still asking to be lived before it can be told. (Researcher's Journal Entry, December 2025)

In this moment, not-knowing does not signal absence, but a different kind of attentiveness—one that asks me to remain in relation, even when words do not yet arrive. This living in un/certainty, is not incidental; it is central to the work. As Caine et al. (2013) reminded us, composing a self in the midst of lives and relationships shifts our attention away from methodological prescriptions towards a sensitivity to the conditions in which we become with, alongside, side-by-side to one another. In contexts seeking dimensions of closeness and familiarity, methods alone cannot account for what is at stake. What is required instead is an attentiveness to the relational *in-between*—where our being and becoming are unsettled, our living alongside is negotiated, and responsibilities are continuously reworked (Daoust & Caine, submitted).

To live relational ethics in this way is to remain open to uncertainty—not as a problem to resolve, but as a condition of being in relation. It calls for inhabiting liminal spaces, “places of dis/ease” (Clandinin et al., 2018, p.12), where clarity does not precede action. From this stance, stories are not fixed or extractable, but situated, provisional, and co-composed within the midst of everyday and ordinary life. Relationships with participants are therefore not external to the research process; they are the very site through which stories are composed, lived, and continually becoming. To remain in these uncertainties requires resisting conceptions of inquiry that seek methodological clarity, distance, or neutrality. At times, prose itself feels insufficient for holding the uncertainties and responsibilities carried within this relationship. I return to a poetic fragment written in the midst of fieldwork:

*I begin
to relive—
your story—
your voice retold,
your words carried,
across traveling worlds*

*I feel the weight—
the responsibility,
to honour you*us,*

to continue living
the relationship—
akin to friendship. (May, 2025)

These poetic fragments became one way of resisting conceptions of inquiry grounded in methodological distance or neutrality. In this sense, Caine et al. (2022) cautioned against reducing narrative inquiry to a neutral method, where attention shifts towards analyzing language rather than living in relation. Such a move, as McKenna and Pratt (2015) suggested, stands in contrast to a tradition of resistance. For narrative inquirers, philosophical commitments are not a background to the research—it is a way of living it—they carry “spirits of resisting the status quo... composing our lives in ways that call forth relationality, and moral commitment to equity and social justice” (Caine et al., 2022, pp. 8–9). In the midst of this narrative inquiry alongside Mia, these commitments are not abstract. They surface in the very tensions I have been grappling with how to remain in relation without reducing her stories, how to write without distancing, how to inhabit relational ethics that are neither fixed nor neutral. In turn, I wonder: what might it mean to resist the status quo of research practice in this space—not through method alone, but through how I live, write, and remain responsible within our relationship?

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) themselves struggled to name the “intensive close working relationships with practitioners” that bring “fundamental ethical issues close to the surface throughout the research, from negotiation of entry to the preparation of results” (p. 273). These are not distant concerns from years ago. They surface in the everyday moments I was invited to live, tell, retell, and relive alongside Mia—in schoolyards and project spaces, conversations, silences, hesitations, and returns. Over time, I began to understand how these ethical tensions are not confined to singular spaces or moments within the field, but move relationally across the multiple worlds we inhabit together. One moment, in particular, stays with me:

I have been grappling with how to name this closeness. When I speak about this research to others, I pause, hesitating between “participant” and “friend,” between “co-composer” and “collaborator.” The boundary is not a line, it is a tension, a shifting space between knowing and unknowing, listening and being listened to, caring and being cared for. (Researcher’s Journal Entry, April 2025)

What became visible in moments such as these was how relational ethics could not be contained within the role of researcher alone. Rather, these tensions travelled across the multiplicity of worlds I inhabited simultaneously—as researcher, educator, mother, and community member—where the boundaries between these identities became increasingly difficult to disentangle.

What also became increasingly visible was that relational ethics could not be understood as existing solely between researcher and participant. Mia and I were each already living within broader constellations of relationships that continuously shaped this inquiry: relationships with children, teachers, parents, school administrators, response community members, family members, and others who moved in and out of the worlds we inhabited. The relational work of this inquiry was therefore never confined to our conversations alone. The stories Mia shared carried traces of the relationships she lived beyond the inquiry, just as my responsibilities within the research travelled into my familial, professional, and community worlds. In this sense, narrative inquiry “people in relation *with* people in relation” became visible not simply as a methodological phrase, but as a lived relational condition that exceeded the boundaries of the formal research relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189; emphasis added).

Writing three decades later, Clandinin et al. (2018) returned to these tensions through an explicit articulation of relational ethics: “In thinking with relational ethics, there is a sense of living with responsibilities and friendships that carries across times, that shapes who we are and are becoming. Relational ethics in this way is future-oriented, as much as it is lived in the present” (p. 4). Their words help me understand that relational ethics is not simply about how we conduct research with participants in the present moment. Rather, it asks how we continue living responsibility within relationships that carry across time and worlds, shaping who we are becoming alongside one another. Within this inquiry, friendship was not peripheral to the research process. It became one way relational ethics was lived, negotiated, and carried within the unfolding of our lives in relation.

Arendtian Friendship as a Dimension of Relational Ethics

I am drawn to the way you move between school and home, as though the boundary between the two is thin, almost permeable. This movement seems to shape how you experience each space and how you come into relation with those within them. I find myself moving in a similar way—inhabiting an in-between space, on the line between my role as a researcher and my being and becomings of a friend. The line between our

multiplicities, between your stories and mine, feels increasingly blurred. What opens up instead is a cornucopia of shared space, of relations. (Researcher's Journal Entry in conversation with Mia, July, 2025)

Returning to these fragments of my letters to Mia, I am reminded that narrative inquiry has long been imagined as fundamentally relational—an ethical terrain where friendship is not absent, but often left unnamed. Alluding to friendship then, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) wrote:

In everyday life, the idea of friendship implies a sharing, an interpenetration of two or more persons' spheres of experience. Mere contact is acquaintanceship, not friendship. The same may be said for collaborative research which requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined, as McIntyre implies, by the narrative unities of our lives. (p. 281)

While friendship has not fully been taken up explicitly in methodological language, what became visible from my time alongside Mia is how it constitutes the interpenetration of our lives—how experiences are shared, taken up, and lived alongside one another. And still, it remains largely unspoken—friendship is held in the margins, felt and negotiated, but seldom brought fully into view.

It is in midst of dwelling within this margin that I find myself turning to the work of Hannah Arendt. In 1968, Arendt wrote, “friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (p. 25). This line unsettles any easy framing of friendship as private or merely affective, insisting instead that friendship bears responsibility for the world held in common. These questions carry me to another piece of writing I shared with Mia:

Listening to your voice in my earphones—describing your weekly full-on days of project time and lunches alongside your children, your interactions with teachers outside regular hours, and your ongoing commitment to making this school experience magical, I am becoming increasingly aware of what this school represents for you. It is a layered and intimate space. Your description of it as a home and family is not metaphorical; it alludes to a place where your being continues—from within the everyday life of the school.

(Researcher's Journal Entry in conversation with Mia, May 2025)

For Arendt (1968), friendship is not a private refuge but a way of inhabiting the world with others—a relation through which one learns to appear, to speak, and to see from another's

standpoint. Friendship holds a doubleness: a closeness grounded in familiarity, and a distance grounded in respect. Friends remain *forever unequal or different* yet meet one another in plurality. It is this complexity—intimacy held together with distance—that becomes generative for thinking about relational ethics in narrative inquiry.

Our relationship carries a certain intimacy, yet it remains held by professional and social responsibility. I notice this same complexity mirrored in how you move alongside teachers at the school—not as someone observing from the edges, but as someone living and labouring with them, within the everyday and ordinary life of the place.

(Researcher's Journal Entry in conversation with Mia, July, 2025)

Thinking with the stories of Mia traveling between school and home, appearing at times to fold into one another, I am reminded of Nixon's (2015) reading of Arendt, where friendship is described as a shared "microworld"—a small world held between people, belonging fully to neither one alone. As he wrote: "Conceived as a voluntary and mutual relationship—within which each friend recognizes and respects the equality and distinctiveness of the other—friendship becomes a microcosm of a pluralistic world... Friendship is worldly and, as such, participates in both the realm of the private and that of the public" (p. 28). These relationships are not without tension. They require ongoing negotiation, not only of closeness, but of how to live together within difference.

Arendt turned my attention to judgement. Not as a matter of correctness, but as an ethical capacity: to discern distance, to decide how to stand in relation to another, and to take up their standpoint without dissolving one's own. Judgement, in this sense, makes plurality possible. It prepares the space between people—a space where relationships can endure without collapsing into sameness or distance. This is the world-between of which Arendt referred to. To befriend the world, in this Arendtian sense, is to take it seriously—to be both drawn to it and resistant to what it asks of us. The world-between that friendship creates is fragile. It depends on our capacity to remain in relation, to speak with one another, and to hold difference without retreating from it. When this capacity falters, what is at risk is not simply the relationship itself, but the possibility of a shared world. Returning to my writing alongside Mia, I began to understand how these Arendtian tensions were not abstract philosophical concerns, but lived ethical questions carried within the act of narrative inquiry itself.

Sitting with these ideas, I find myself returning—not to resolve them, but to live more carefully within them. If friendship, as Arendt suggested, holds both intimacy and distance, then I cannot settle this tension in my work alongside Mia. I have to remain with it. I notice how this presses on me as I write. How close do I come? What do I carry forward, and what do I leave held between us? These are not decisions I make once. They return, again and again, in the midst of writing—quietly asking something of me. As I write these words, I am drawn to another field text I shared with Mia:

*Relational ethics
in narrative inquiry
are not static—
they are carried forward
in how I write,
in how I live,
in how I remain—
in relation. (May, 2025)*

Relational ethics grounded in Arendtian friendship is not something I step into and out of. It is lived in these moments of hesitation, in the pauses, in the uncertainty of how to go on. Friendship does not make this easier. If anything, it deepens the ethical weight of remaining alongside another. I feel more acutely what it means to continue carrying the stories we have lived in relation with one another—how I write, how I respond, and how I remain accountable to what has been entrusted to me. I am left wondering what it means to stay with this—without closing it, without resolving it too quickly—and to continue writing in a way that does not step away from the relationship, but remains accountable to it.

I think back now to one of the earliest moments of this narrative inquiry. When I finished describing my research puzzle to teachers at Mockingbird, one teacher responded with a certainty that surprised me: Mia is the ideal participant. I return to this moment now differently, aware of how much was already being carried within that naming—relationships, responsibilities, and ways of remaining in relation that neither Mia nor I could yet fully understand as we began inhabiting this world-between together.

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Chapter Ten: So Long, For Now

The joy in being a narrative inquirer
 lies amidst the in-between spaces.
 A space where I learned
 to savor the vertigo of doing with/out answers
 or making do with fragmentary ones, a time
 of recognizing and playing with pattern,
 finding coherence within complexity,
 sharing within multiplicity (Bateson, 1994)
 and a time of
 coming and
 becoming
 together. (Caine, 2007, p. 171)

A few years ago, I highlighted the sentences above in pink, written in the concluding chapter of Caine's dissertation (2007). I also noted in the margin something like this:

joy of—
 uncertainty—living
possibility

Reading these marginal notes today, I want to add other words:

with
 alongside
 side-by-side
togetherness
 moving away—
 sameness
 jumping—propelled
uniqueness
 in complexity, in perplexity, in wonder—*vita activa*
 possibility / togetherness / uniqueness

I attempt to remember what first opened this dissertation. Returning to the pages just beyond the *Preface*, I find that I had begun with the beautiful words of Maria Lugones. In 1987, she wrote: “Playfulness is an attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, that turns the activity into play [...] involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness of self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the world’s we inhabit playfully” (p. 17). She described this playfulness as a way of *world-travelling*— “a skillful, creative, rich, enriching and, given certain circumstances, as a loving way of being and living,” a practice without fixed rules, yet deeply intentional, where uncertainty is not a limitation but an openness to surprise (p. 19). Lugones’ (1987) words continue to accompany me now, as I write these lines. I remain wide-awake to how what may have first appeared as a playful gesture has become something far more enduring: an ethical and relational commitment to remain open to surprise, uncertainty, and to the ongoing co-composing of stories, selves, and worlds that narrative inquiry calls me into.

I am drawn to another fragment of my narrative beginnings, one in which I retell a story of being alongside my children, in the kitchen: the taste of *chocolat*, feet swinging, laughter filling the space. This one, right here:

That image—pure, unfiltered delight—is engraved in my mind.

Click.

A snapshot.

I carry it with me as the morning unfolds. The sound of their laughter. The sweetness of, and literally on, their faces. The feeling of being right there, in the middle of their joy.

Remember the experience, remember the story, I tell myself.



This narrative inquiry invited me to slow down—to live alongside my stories, and those of parents, in place, across time—and to become attentive to the in-between spaces that shape our lives in schools and beyond. Moving backward and forward, inward and outward, across time, space, and place, I am struck by how this narrative inquiry has become part of me—altering how I come to understand stories, relationships, and the worlds we live within.

Narrative Inquiry and Thought-in-Relation

This becoming has unfolded in relation to thinking alongside people, stories, places, and the work of living and inquiring. As Caine (2007) wrote, “I realize the importance of the multiplicity of relationships that form my dwelling places, the pauses in my life, in my research” (p. 182). Her words resonate as I sit with the stories carried within this narrative inquiry: alongside research participants, in classrooms and around kitchen tables, in project blocks and schoolyards, in conversations both on and off the recordings, within response communities and across the white pages of my research journal, in resonance with what has been said before and with imagined futures, and within the social, cultural, institutional, and political landscapes where these stories continue to matter across time, place, and relation.

I am drawn to another piece Caine (2007) wrote: “In these spaces, intentionally and unintentionally, is the possibility that I may learn more about who I am, my life stories, and who I am becoming” (p. 171). Thinking with the stories told and lived over the course of this degree, I find myself dwelling with experience in the present (Heidegger, 1971), remaining still enough to stay with what these stories ask of me. This becoming unfolded as a temporal, relational, and *place-based* endeavour: a continual returning to stories through the retelling, reliving, and reimagining of experience across these shifting landscapes of my life story.

I turn to Chambers (1994), who wrote about memories:

Our memories are always a reconstruction, purposeful forgettings, partial truths. Writing them is a reconstruction as well. Putting words, and interpretations, structure to that which is formless, a slide-show or images and moments. There is a story but it lurks not always ready to present itself as a complete picture. There are only previews of the coming attraction. (p. 43)

As I think with fragmented storied experiences, memories, and forward-looking possibilities, I return once more to a question that has lingered throughout this narrative inquiry: *What kinds of bent-over-holding-hands-in-reciprocity-with-all-my-relations become (im)possible in this era?*

I linger with the many lives and iterations of this question—written in different colorful research journals, messages to friends, and across the scattered pages that accompanied this inquiry. These traces remind me that writing is never merely the act of putting words down; it is also the act of erasing, reshaping, and imagining anew. In this way, thought does not remain abstract. It moves across relationships, conversations, pauses, and writing.

I turn to Arendt (1958) who wrote:

Thought was secondary to speech, but speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant not only the most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information and communication that may convey, is *action*.
(p. 26; emphasis added)

I keep returning to these words, wondering how deeply they resonate with my becoming a narrative inquirer. Narrative inquiry, above all, invited me to linger with what it means to think, live, and act *otherwise*.

Wondering What Could be Otherwise

In this narrative inquiry, I attended to the complexity of parents' storied experiences in schools and educational spaces. From my time alongside the educational community of RÉPAQ, I became increasingly attentive to how parents are imagined, positioned, and storied within spaces such as research, schools, and teacher education. As I reflect on my own preparation as a teacher, I cannot recall being invited to see parents as relational partners whose stories matter. Parents appeared, if at all, at the margins of professional preparation—figured through policies, expectations, or challenges to be managed.

Research in teacher education has long shown that family-school relationships are often addressed instrumentally or as peripheral to professionalism, leaving beginning teachers underprepared to engage meaningfully with families and the broader communities in which children live. In their review of scholarship spanning five decades, Pushor and Amendt (2018) noted the persistent absence of parent engagement within teacher education curricula, describing this absence as a widespread and international phenomenon. Such absences matter. As Crozier and Davies (2007) suggested, narrowly prescribed frameworks shaped through educational and governmental policy often define limited roles for parents in relation to schools, inhibiting accessibility for some families while privileging particular forms of participation and visibility. Pushor's (2015) work, by contrast, called attention to how parents are positioned at the margins of schooling rather than understood as relational partners with stories to tell and live alongside their children's school lives. If teachers are not invited to think alongside parents' stories in teacher education, they may enter classrooms already carrying inherited stories about distance,

expertise, and authority—assumptions that quietly structure how relationships with families come to be understood and lived.

This narrative inquiry therefore calls for teacher education spaces where future teachers are invited to think with parents' stories before entering classrooms, to reflect with their storied assumptions about expertise, authority, and distance. Rather than preparing teachers to merely “manage” relationships with families, this work points towards pedagogical possibilities grounded in sustained relational encounters with parents, communities, and the everyday worlds children inhabit beyond school walls. In this way, this work pushes against dominant narratives of schooling which continue to (re)produce parents at the margins of educational life, even within institutional and contemporary discourses that call for partnership, engagement, and inclusion. It is precisely against this backdrop that, from my time at Mockingbird, I came to see that parent presence in schools cannot be reduced to metrics of engagement or the rhetoric of partnership. Over time, I came to understand that the stories lived, told, retold, and relived alongside Annie, Mia, William, and Claire did more than recount experience; they shifted something in how I understand what it means to live in schools alongside parents, families, and communities. I was left with moments of bewilderment, wondering what might become possible when these stories are taken up differently in other spaces—when they are allowed to shape how educational communities are imagined, lived, and sustained. Within Mockingbird, what became visible was not simply whether parents were present, but *how* their stories, relationships, and ways of appearing were continuously co-composed, negotiated, and sustained alongside others in the educational community.

At the same time, this narrative inquiry also illuminated important tensions within alternative public school communities such as Mockingbird. While Mockingbird was a place that is markedly different from many schools in Québec, Canada; it also remained entangled and threaded within broader educational and institutional discourses. The school's commitments to parent involvement, co-education, and collective responsibility created meaningful possibilities for relational forms of schooling; however, these commitments were not experienced equally by all families. Participation in these spaces often relied upon assumptions regarding parents' time, flexibility, financial stability, and capacity to remain visibly present within the life of the school. As such, the very structures intended to foster this educational community may also risk (re)producing forms of selectivity, where access and sustained involvement are more visible for

some families than for others. This research therefore calls for more nuanced and permeable considerations of parental engagement within educational policy and practice—particularly around questions of agency, capacity, labour, and social justice.

These tensions also raise broader questions regarding how these institutional understandings of the “engaged” or “involved” parent may unintentionally privilege forms of visibility, flexibility, and participation in more accessible and visible to some families than others. While family-school-community partnerships are often celebrated within educational discourse, this narrative inquiry invites teachers, school leaders, administrators, and teacher educators to critically (re)consider how such relationships might be (re)imagined and (re)enacted in practice. Remaining attentive to the social, economic, political, familial, and institutional conditions shaping who is able to participate, appear, and remain sustained within these spaces/places across time becomes critically important. Despite well-intentioned efforts, schoolcentric approaches can position children, parents, and families through deficit narratives, imagining some families as needing intervention, correction, or fixing because they do not align with institutional expectations or agendas (Pushor, 2015). As Perrier (2017) suggested, schools can risk reproducing forms of institutional egocentrism, centering their own priorities and assumptions without fully attending to the realities shaping families’ capacities to participate. Engagement may therefore become understood transactionally, through what parents are able to contribute to schools, rather than relationally through how schools and families live alongside one another in the education of children.

Pushor’s (2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) work offered an important shift away from schoolcentric understandings towards what she described as a familycentric approach to schooling. A familycentric approach reflects a philosophy and pedagogy of accompaniment, a process of “walking alongside” families. Pushor and Amendt (2018) also wrote about the possibilities of cultivating a community of conscience as a way of opening conversations around how relationships with parents and community members might be otherwise imagined within educational spaces. Such communities are grounded in walking alongside one another—in collaboration with families, educators, and school communities—as people work toward shared commitments and the co-composition of educational landscapes extending across home, school, and community life. Within such an approach, parents are understood as holders of deeply valuable knowledge about children, teaching, and learning—knowledge that might perhaps

differs from, yet complements, the professional knowledge held by educators (Pushor, 2015). As teachers and administrators walk *alongside* parents in the lifelong process of educating children, possibilities emerge for forms of relationship grounded in what Nel Noddings (2002) described as “caring for” and “caring about”. It is within the intimacy of connection and relationship that there becomes greater possibility for genuinely knowing one another and for shaping curriculum, programs, and educational experiences in relation with the lives families are already living.

This narrative inquiry therefore wonders what might become possible if schools moved away from interventionist logics towards more humble, relational, and responsive ways of thinking with families and communities. In other words, rather than positioning schools as institutions primarily asking what families can contribute to them, this work invites reconsideration of the role schools themselves play within the lives of families and communities. Such considerations extend beyond alternative schooling contexts, inviting broader reflection on how schools participate in shaping democratic, relational, and communal life alongside children and families. Moving relationally alongside parents may therefore require distancing ourselves from some of the very institutional and social cultures schools often seek to dismantle.

These questions are not only theoretical for me; they also live closely within my own experiences as a parent. As a mother of two beautiful children—one anxious to enter the world of schooling in September 2026—I find myself returning to what Greene (1995) described as the call to imagine what could be *otherwise*. This dissertation invited me to imagine the stories of being, living, learning alongside my children, and to begin writing, together, what Pushor and Brouwer (2026) alluded to as a *family memoir*. In doing so, I have found myself wondering about the stories that existed long before our physical presence—stories across generations, lingering in the present, and stretching towards imagined futures. Stories that are rooted in education, schooling, and community-making. Through their work alongside families, Pushor and Brouwer created spaces for conversation, shared ethical response, and co-composed stories. In this narrative inquiry, I came to understand not only how such spaces invite parents to remain in meaningful relation with their children’s education, but also how they create possibilities for parents to feel heard, valued, and genuinely engaged within the educational life over time, in place, and in relation. This resonates deeply with how I imagined this work throughout the course of this dissertation: a future in which teachers my own children encounter are invited to learn alongside parents’ stories—stories in hallways, echoed in classrooms, and carried across

schoolyards and beyond. Stories that softly whisper: *children first, children first, children first, children first.*

This work invited me to envision pedagogical spaces where parents are recognized as co-participants in the making of curriculum, community, and story alongside children. The stories retold and relived throughout this inquiry invite parent participation to be understood as a moral, relational, and temporal endeavour. I continue wondering what becomes possible when parents are seen, heard, and lived alongside in this *light*—how schools might become spaces where people learn to remain in relation within the fragile, contested, and necessary world-between where we are called to share.

Narrative Inquiry as a Relational Methodology

As I reflect on my being and becoming a narrative inquirer, I am brought to the first summer institute I attended in Vallendar, Germany, in 2019, when I was a first-year master's student tentatively dipping my toes into the philosophical and methodological waters of narrative inquiry and its possibilities for studying people in relation *with* people in relation. At the time, I read the assigned texts dutifully, filling notebooks as though preparing for an exam, recording what narrative inquirers had already written. Six years later, I had the privilege of travelling to Bergen, Norway, for the International Summer School of Narrative Inquiry: For Love of the World (Hannah Arendt Edition, 2025). I arrived there as a doctoral candidate in the midst of co-composing research participants' narrative accounts. I no longer arrived to absorb; I came searching for language—my language—for the lived complexities of being in relation with participants across both master's and doctoral narrative inquiries. Returning to the social, theoretical, personal, and practical justifications of narrative inquiry, I remain wide-awake to how these justifications are already intertwined, refusing to settle neatly into separate sections or categories. *They live along-side-by-side-with-across one another.*

It feels crucial to continue with this field text, written during my time in Bergen, Norway:

I write: Narrative inquiry is the study of...

And here I stall.

In the room where I have been meeting alongside my response community these past two days, I find myself suspended between presence and absence. It is a space

and place that feels at once empty and overflowing—with stories, with echoes, with traces of lives lived here.

My eyes keep returning to the details of one side of the room, on the right of where I am currently sitting: the soft copper-brown couch, its yellow cushions gently worn, almost sacred in the way they are placed. In front of them, two hand-beaded rectangular pillows, intricate and luminous, the same yellow as the other ones with a touch of orange and brown, as though they carry their own stories stitched into every bead.

I wonder if the couch was placed here with intention, positioned just beneath the large map of Norway.

Beside it, slightly lower, hangs the map of the world. Norway, and then the world. A juxtaposition that feels less like decoration and more like a quiet suggestion about the relationship between place and belonging.

And here, in this place, *I stall*—

I have been writing, reading, and most importantly, sharing my wonders about relationships—how and why they begin, how they hold, how and why they matter. Perhaps this will become one of the enduring wonders of my PhD: the wonder of relationship... or is it actually about friendship?

I come this week with intentions to write about the stories of entering in the midst of research participants' lives, of how relationships in research are lived and understood when one is only just beginning as a narrative inquirer.

I find myself just as drawn to the quiet stories in this room—the way the furniture, the maps, the arrangement of things whisper to me about relation, about proximity, about the world we make together. Stories told, lived, retold, and relived alongside people, places, and the quiet material presences that accompany us in relation.

And here, in this space, *I stall*.

Narrative inquiry is the study of...

I have written these lines before. I have been told, more than once, that my memory is good.

And yet here I am, still reaching for a sentence—one I
have carried, told
and lived...
a sentence that seems to hold
the exact shape of what I am trying
to understand.

Narrative inquiry, I repeat, is the study of...
I know,
I know this.

Still, a knot tightens.
Discomfort.
What is the noise of silence, I wonder.
Is this what they meant by perplexity?
Maybe not.
I glance at my watch. A flood of notifications from home
waits for me; I choose to ignore them—for now. They
can wait. The hands rest at seven and nine. 19h09
Europe time/ 13h09 home time.

Supper here was at six-thirty.
My stomach reminds me: move, eat.
I pause, then decide—I will ask for help.
I see Jean—the one (with Connelly) who wrote the
sentence years ago (or what she would gently say:
more than a thousand years ago).

I should not ask. I should already know.

Yet, I am a student after all...

Melissa: Jean, could you tell me again? It is the study
of...

Jean: people in relation studying people in relation.
[silence]²

*What does that even mean, Jean—
I am afraid to ask.*

Live in this perplexity.

² This came to mind: Silence always and only exists in relation to that which surrounds it. It is the blank spaces between words, and as such it helps to frame not only the meaning of what is said but that which can be said, a refuge for both the unsaid and the unsayable (Andrews, 2010, p. 161).

Melissa: Can you say it again?

She looks up. I lower my eyes to her hands.

Jean: Narrative inquiry is—

Both: the study of—

Jean (hands opening, palms facing *up*, to form a group on the left): people in relation...

Both: studying—

Jean (hands moving to form another group on the right): people in relation.

I look up at—and towards—her.

Who appears in this study?
Who gathers first? Who arrives later?

What are we being asked to do—
to witness,
to respond,
to risk?

How do I show this
without fixing it,
without closing—
what is still unfolding?

How do I trace the becoming
of relations—
to people, to world, to writing,
to time,
to place—

While I, too,
appear—
uncertain,
still *becoming*?

(Melissa's Research Journal Entry, August 2025)

Over time, I understood that narrative inquiry does not simply begin and end with participants' stories. It unfolds within the relationships that sustain the inquiry itself: within communities such as Mockingbird, narrative inquiry response communities, conversations, shared silences, field texts, and the ongoing ethical work of living alongside one another in world, word, and work. In this way, narrative inquiry became not only about studying experience and stories, but also about learning how to remain within relationships over time and across place/space.

Concluding Remark

As I linger with the title of this dissertation and the pseudonym of the school that became so central to this narrative inquiry, I find myself returning once more to *Mockingbird*. I learned that mockingbirds carry the songs of others within their own voices, gathering fragments across encounters, places, and time. They are known for listening closely to the worlds around them and responding in return with echoes, variations, and *reimaginings*.

I return often to the moment when the name Mockingbird first emerged, and to the growing realization that this place was becoming intertwined with how I had come to attend to narrative inquiry as a methodology and phenomenon. I felt that narrative inquiry was asking something similar: to live alongside stories long enough that they begin to resonate within us; to carry the reverberations of conversations, pauses, tensions, laughter, silences, and lives entrusted to us in relation; to understand that stories are never fully ours alone, but are already-always co-composed with others and within worlds that continue to circle them. There is something profoundly human in this constellation of gathering, carrying, and remaining in relation to stories. As Clandinin (2023) reminded us, “thinking with stories is primarily thinking relationally” (p. 17). In narrative inquiry, like in a space such as Mockingbird, we learn one another's songs before we fully understand our own. We inherit stories, resist stories, retell stories, and sometimes, if we are fortunate, imagine them *otherwise*.

I am left with the wonder of what it means to continue this work of holding stories in this way—carefully, imperfectly, relationally. Returning to them. Turning them backward, forward, sideways. Retelling them amidst the worlds they inhabit. Reliving them as we ponder what they might still call us into. If Mockingbird does not sing only its own song, perhaps neither do we.

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Acknowledgements and Dédicace

As I return to this dissertation—to my years as a doctoral candidate, mesmerized by the possibilities of research, education, and schools, and by how these spaces might be *otherwise*—what I carry with me from this journey is gratitude.

I am grateful for the people I have met and for the more-than-human relations with whom I have learned to live—in relation.

There were moments throughout my schooling when I wanted to give up. There were moments when I wanted to run away and never come back. Yet, I always returned to school, continuing my search for people who saw me, understood me, and cared for me and my stories.

I am grateful for each of them.

kinanāskomitin, wela'lioq, cho ma'asi', chi-miigwech, kitchi marsii,
merci, thank you, grazie, danke schön

Spread the Love, I will.

À mon amoureux

À ma famille

À mes ami·e·s

À Sam et Louis, votre maman vous aime de tout son cœur. Merci de m'avoir permis de réaliser mon rêve de devenir Dre Mel, tout en vivant le plus beau de tous : être votre maman.

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Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval and Renewal

19/02/2026

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

S-03-25-11313

Titre du projet / Project Title

A Narrative Inquiry into the
Experiences of Parents at an
Alternative School

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral
thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Renouvelé / Renewed

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

14/03/2025

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

13/03/2027

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher

Affiliation

Role

Melissa DAOUST

Faculté d'éducation / Faculty of Education

Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator

Marie-Hélène BRUNET

Faculté d'éducation / Faculty of Education

Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

S-03-25-11313 - REG-11313 - Certificat d'approbation éthique / Certificate of Ethics Approval

(English message follows)

Cher/Chère Melissa Daoust,

Veillez trouver ci-joint le certificat d'approbation éthique pour le projet intitulé «A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School».

Le certificat est valide jusqu'au : 13-03-2026

Recherche financée : veuillez faire suivre une copie du certificat au [Service de gestion de la recherche](#).

Si vous avez des questions, n'hésitez pas à communiquer avec le Bureau d'éthique à ethique@uottawa.ca ou en composant le 613-562-5387.

Vous pouvez voir votre demande en vous connectant à votre compte [eReviews](#).

Cordialement,

Riana Marcotte
Responsable d'éthique en recherche

Ceci est une réponse automatisée, merci de ne pas répondre à ce courriel.

Dear Melissa Daoust,

Please find attached the certificate of ethics approval for your research project titled "A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School".

This certificate is valid until: 13-03-2026

Funded research: A reminder that you must provide a copy of this certificate to [Research Management Services](#).

If you have any questions, please contact the Ethics Office at ethics@uottawa.ca or by telephone at 613-562-5387.

You can view your project at any time by logging into [eReviews](#).

Best regards,

Riana Marcotte
Protocol Officer

This is an automated message. Please do not reply directly to this email.

Attachement(s) / Attachment(s)

[approvalLetter1741958519329.pdf](#)

Appendix B: Consent Form for Research Participant (English Version Follows)

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Formulaire de consentement pour les parents

Titre de l'étude : Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec

Nom de la chercheuse principale : Melissa Daoust, candidate au doctorat à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Nom de la directrice de recherche : Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, professeure agrégée à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Invitation à participer : Je suis invité(e) à participer à une étude de recherche intitulée "Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec". Cette étude est menée par Melissa Daoust dans le cadre de sa thèse de doctorat sous la supervision de la Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

But de l'étude : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les expériences des parents et des enseignants dans une école alternative au Québec, où la collaboration entre les familles et les enseignants est au cœur de la philosophie éducative. Par le biais d'une recherche narrative, cette étude examine les relations parents-enseignants, en mettant en lumière la façon dont les parents sont considérés comme co-éducateurs et co-gestionnaires de l'éducation de leurs enfants.

Au moyen d'entrevues approfondies enregistrées, d'observations et de journaux de réflexion, la recherche vise à comprendre comment ces partenariats influencent les expériences scolaires, la perception de la communauté et les approches de l'engagement famille-école.

Participation : Ma participation à cette étude consistera à réaliser des entretiens audio avec la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, sur une période de quatre mois. Chaque entretien durera environ 60 minutes et aura lieu à une date, une heure et un lieu convenus mutuellement. La fréquence de ces entretiens sera de deux par mois, pour un total de 6 à 8 entretiens. Tous les entretiens seront enregistrés et transcrits.

Lors des entretiens, je pourrai partager mes expériences passées et actuelles au sein du système scolaire alternatif. Je serai invité(e), si je le souhaite, à apporter des photos de lieux et de personnes importantes ou un objet significatif pour enrichir nos discussions. Aucune copie de ces éléments ne sera conservée, et ceux-ci me seront retournés.

Faculté d'éducation
Faculty of Education

613-562-5804

1-800-860-8577

613-562-5963

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Canada



uOttawa

Je pourrai consulter la transcription des entretiens et donner mes commentaires dans un délai de deux semaines suivant sa réception. De plus, j'aurai la possibilité de commenter le récit narratif que la chercheuse rédigera à partir de mes transcriptions.

Enfin, je pourrai inviter la chercheuse à observer ma participation en classe à deux reprises durant la période de quatre mois. Ces observations seront organisées en collaboration avec l'enseignant(e) concerné(e).

Risques : Ma participation pourrait m'amener à partager des expériences qui dépeignent l'école sous un jour négatif ou à discuter de conflits internes. Si certaines critiques deviennent publiques, je pourrais ressentir des tensions avec d'autres parents, enseignants ou administrateurs scolaires. La chercheuse prendra toutes les précautions nécessaires pour minimiser ces risques, en présentant les données sous forme de descriptions plus larges et de conclusions agrégées. Je pourrai aussi me retirer à tout moment et choisir ce que je souhaite partager.

Comme cette étude implique plusieurs entretiens, ce processus peut être exigeant en termes de temps. Pour limiter cette contrainte, la chercheuse proposera des horaires flexibles, incluant des soirs et des fins de semaine, et les entretiens auront lieu à un endroit de mon choix.

Bienfaits : Cette étude me permettra de réfléchir à mon engagement dans l'éducation de mes enfants et dans la communauté scolaire. Elle pourrait également renforcer mes relations avec les enseignants et aider à améliorer les pratiques de collaboration entre parents et enseignants.

Confidentialité et vie privée : Les informations partagées resteront strictement confidentielles et seront utilisées uniquement à des fins académiques. Mon anonymat sera assuré par :

1. La divulgation des informations uniquement avec mon consentement.
2. L'utilisation de pseudonymes.
3. La modification des noms d'écoles et d'organisations pour préserver l'anonymat.

Toutefois, en raison du contexte scolaire spécifique, l'anonymat complet ne peut être garanti. Avant la diffusion des résultats, j'aurai l'opportunité de revoir et de modifier les données me concernant.

Conservation des données : Les données collectées (entretiens audio, transcriptions, notes de la chercheuse) seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Les enregistrements seront protégés par mot de passe, et seuls Melissa Daoust et sa directrice y auront accès. Les documents imprimés seront entreposés dans un classeur verrouillé à son domicile. Les notes et enregistrements seront conservés indéfiniment pour assurer l'intégrité de l'étude.

Participation volontaire : Ma participation à cette étude est complètement volontaire. Je peux me retirer à tout moment sans conséquences. Si je me retire, toutes mes données seront immédiatement détruites.

Pour tout renseignement additionnel concernant cette étude, je peux communiquer avec la chercheuse ou son superviseur.

Pour tout renseignement sur les aspects éthiques de cette recherche, je peux m'adresser au Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche de Université d'Ottawa au (613) 562-5800 ext. 5387 ou ethique@uottawa.ca.

La chercheuse me recommande de conserver une copie du formulaire de consentement.

Je souhaite participer en : (Veuillez cocher ✓ une case)

☐ Réalisant des entretiens enregistrés uniquement

☐ Réalisant des entretiens enregistrés **et** en permettant les observations en classe

Acceptation :

Nom du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature de la chercheuse : _____ Date : _____

English version

Consent Form for Parents

Title of the study: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec

Name of Principal Investigator: Melissa Daoust, Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Invitation to Participate: I am being invited to participate in a research study entitled “A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec”. This study is conducted by Melissa Daoust for her doctoral thesis and is under the supervision of Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of parents and teachers within an alternative school in Quebec, Canada, where collaboration between families and teachers is foundational to the education philosophy. Using narrative inquiry, this study delves into the complexities of parent-teacher relationships, examining how parents are positioned as co-educators and co-managers in their children’s education. Through a series of in-depth, audio-recorded conversations with parents and teachers, along with observations and reflective journaling, the research seeks to illuminate how these partnerships shape educational experiences, perceptions of community, and broader understandings of family-school engagement.

Participation: My participation in this study will consist of audio-recorded conversations with the researcher, Melissa Daoust, over a 4-month time period. Each conversation will take approximately 60 minutes. The conversations will be scheduled for a mutually agreed upon time, date, and place. The frequency of these conversations will be twice a month for a total of 6-8 conversations. All conversations will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

During the conversations, I am welcome to talk freely about my past and current experiences and to share stories of the alternative school system. I will be invited, if I want, to bring photos of the important places and people in my life, or an artefact that has a special meaning for me, to our conversations. These photos and items will help the researcher to better understand my experiences. No copies will be made and all the photos and items will remain with me.

I will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the conversations with the option of providing feedback by email or in person at an agreed upon time, date, and place within two weeks of receiving the transcript. I will also be given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the narrative account the researcher will generate based on my transcripts within two weeks of receiving it.

Finally, I will have the opportunity to invite the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to observe my involvement in my children’s classroom on two occasions over a four-month period. These

observations will be scheduled at a mutually agreed-upon time, with the researcher coordinating the sessions in collaboration with the teacher involved.

Risks: My participation in this study might entail that I share stories that portray the school in a negative light or discuss conflicts that I may be experiencing within the school community. If certain viewpoints or criticisms become known within the school, I might experience tensions with other parents, teachers, or school administrators, particularly if my perspectives challenge dominant narratives about the school's governance, policies, or culture. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks. I have complete control over what I choose to share during the conversations. I have the option to refuse to answer or withdraw at any point in time. The researcher, Melissa Daoust, will take extra precautions in writing to present stories with broader descriptions and aggregated findings where possible, minimizing the risk of indirect identification while still honoring the integrity of my narratives. At any moment, I can stop the conversation. The usage of pseudonyms will protect my identity.

This study involves parents agreeing to take part in 6-8 conversations, which can be time-consuming. To minimize the time commitment and scheduling challenges, the researcher, Melissa Daoust, will offer flexible scheduling options for conversations, including evenings and weekends, based on my availability. In addition, Melissa will allow conversations to take place in a location of my choice. Moreover, Melissa will ensure to keep each session within a pre-agreed time frame.

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide me with an opportunity for critical reflection on my involvement in my children's education and my engagement within the school community. This process has the potential to generate valuable insights to enhance my parenting practices and strengthen my relationships with teachers. Furthermore, this participation may assist teachers and pre-service teachers in developing strategies to collaborate with parents both within and beyond the classroom.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the data will be used only for academic purposes as outlined by the researcher. This includes the researcher's Ph.D. thesis, potential publication in academic journals and books, presentations, and teaching activities related to the research topic.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: (1) any information that is obtained in this study will be disclosed only with my permission; (2) pseudonyms will be assigned to me; (3) any names or places (including the name of the school and school board) will be altered to avoid any personal identification.

While the researcher, Melissa Daoust, will take all necessary steps to protect my anonymity, the specific school context and the nature of my involvement in the study make it impossible to guarantee complete anonymity. Before any findings are shared with a larger audience, I will have the opportunity to review, modify, or remove any material I wish.

Conservation of Data: The data collected (audio-recorded conversations, transcripts, and researcher notes) will be kept in a secure manner by Melissa Daoust. After transcription, electronic copies of interviews will be password-protected, and only Melissa Daoust will have access to them. Any hardcopies of interview recordings, transcripts, and researcher notes will be stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet at the home office of Melissa Daoust to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the data. Melissa Daoust, as the researcher, will retain copies of her notes and conversations indefinitely. This retention allows for the potential need to refer to the data during the analysis phase, addressing any queries that may arise or for the purpose of ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and it is entirely my choice to decide whether or not to continue with the study. I have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, and I can also choose not to answer any specific questions without facing any negative consequences.

If I choose to withdraw, the researcher will ensure that all data gathered from my participation until the time of withdrawal is promptly destroyed. To initiate the withdrawal process, I can contact the researcher using the contact information provided in this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387).

It is recommended that I keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

I am interested in participating by: (Please check ✓ one box)

- ☐ completing audio-recorded conversations *only*
- ☐ completing audio-recorded conversations *and* classroom observations

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____

Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Appendix C: Consent Form for Other Parents (English Version Follows)

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Formulaire de consentement pour les parents (Observations)

- Ce formulaire de consentement s'adresse aux parents présents à l'école lors des observations de la chercheuse Melissa Daoust et qui souhaitent participer à l'étude. En signant ce formulaire, vous donnez votre autorisation pour que la chercheuse observe également votre implication.

Titre de l'étude : Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec

Nom de la chercheuse principale : Melissa Daoust, candidate au doctorat à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Nom de la directrice de recherche : Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, professeure agrégée à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Invitation à participer : Je suis invité(e) à participer à une étude de recherche intitulée "Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec". Cette étude est menée par Melissa Daoust dans le cadre de sa thèse de doctorat sous la supervision de la Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

But de l'étude : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les expériences des parents et des enseignants dans une école alternative au Québec, où la collaboration entre les familles et les enseignants est au cœur de la philosophie éducative. Par le biais d'une recherche narrative, cette étude examine les relations parents-enseignants, en mettant en lumière la façon dont les parents sont considérés comme co-éducateurs et co-gestionnaires de l'éducation de leurs enfants.

Au moyen d'entrevues enregistrés, d'observations et de journaux de réflexion, la recherche vise à comprendre comment ces partenariats influencent les expériences scolaires, la perception de la communauté et les approches de l'engagement famille-école.

Participation : Je suis invité(e) à participer à l'étude de Melissa Daoust sur les expériences des parents dans les écoles alternatives et sur les relations parents-enseignants. Ma participation implique d'être observé(e) par la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, lorsque je suis à l'école.

Risques : Ma participation à cette étude comporte peu de risques. À tout moment, je peux demander à la chercheuse d'arrêter les observations. J'ai le droit de refuser d'être observé(e) ou de me retirer de l'étude à tout moment. Mon identité sera protégée par l'utilisation de pseudonymes.

Faculté d'éducation
Faculty of Education

613-562-5804

1-800-860-8577

613-562-5963

education.uOttawa.ca

145 Jean-Jacques Lussier
Ottawa ON K1N 6N5
Canada

Bienfaits : Cette étude me permettra de réfléchir à mon engagement dans l'éducation de mes enfants et dans la communauté scolaire. Elle pourrait également renforcer mes relations avec les enseignants et aider à améliorer les pratiques de collaboration entre parents et enseignants.

Confidentialité et vie privé : Les informations partagées resteront strictement confidentielles et seront utilisées uniquement à des fins académiques. Mon anonymat sera assuré par :

1. L'utilisation de pseudonymes.
2. La modification des noms d'écoles et d'organisations pour préserver l'anonymat.

Toutefois, en raison du contexte scolaire spécifique, l'anonymat complet ne peut être garanti.

Conservation des données : Les données collectées (notes de la chercheuse) seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Les notes seront entreposées dans un classeur verrouillé à son domicile. Melissa Daoust conservera ses notes indéfiniment pour assurer l'intégrité de l'étude.

Participation volontaire : Ma participation à cette étude est complètement volontaire. Je peux me retirer à tout moment. Si je me retire, toutes mes données seront immédiatement détruites.

Pour tout renseignement additionnel concernant cette étude, je peux communiquer avec la chercheuse ou sa directrice.

Pour tout renseignement sur les aspects éthiques de cette recherche, je peux m'adresser au Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche de Université d'Ottawa au (613) 562-5800 ext. 5387 ou ethique@uottawa.ca.

La chercheuse me recommande de conserver une copie du formulaire de consentement.

Acceptation : En signant mon nom ci-dessous, j'accepte de participer à cette étude de recherche.

Nom du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature de la chercheuse : _____ Date : _____

English Version

Consent Form for Parents

- This consent form is for parents who will be present at the school during the researcher Melissa Daoust's observations and wish to participate in the study. By signing this form, you are giving permission for the researcher to also observe your involvement.

Title of the study: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec

Name of Principal Investigator: Melissa Daoust, Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. Email:

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. Email:

Invitation to Participate: I am being invited to participate in a research study entitled "A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec". This study is conducted by Melissa Daoust for her doctoral thesis and is under the supervision of Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of parents and teachers within an alternative school in Quebec, Canada, where collaboration between families and teachers is foundational to the education philosophy. Using narrative inquiry, this study delves into the complexities of parent-teacher relationships, examining how parents are positioned as co-educators and co-managers in their children's education. Through a series of in-depth, audio-recorded conversations with parents and teachers, along with observations and reflective journaling, the research seeks to illuminate how these partnerships shape educational experiences, perceptions of community, and broader understandings of family-school engagement.

Participation: I am invited to participate in Melissa Daoust's research study on parents' experiences in alternative schools and parent-teacher relationships. My participation involves being observed by the researcher, Melissa Daoust, while at the school.

Risks: My participation in this study involves minimal risk. At any time, I can ask the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to stop the observations. I have the right to refuse to be observed or to withdraw from the study at any point. My identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide me with an opportunity for critical reflection on my involvement in my children's education and my engagement within the school community. This process has the potential to generate valuable insights to enhance my parenting practices and strengthen my relationships with teachers. Furthermore, this participation may assist teachers and pre-service teachers in developing strategies to collaborate with parents both within and beyond the classroom.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the data will be used only for academic purposes as outlined by the researcher. This includes the researcher's Ph.D. thesis, potential publication in academic journals and books, presentations, and teaching activities related to the research topic.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: (1) pseudonyms will be assigned to me; (2) any names or places (including the name of the school and school board) will be altered to avoid any personal identification.

While the researcher, Melissa Daoust, will take all necessary steps to protect my anonymity, the specific school context and the nature of my involvement in the study make it impossible to guarantee complete anonymity.

Conservation of Data: The data collected (researcher notes) will be kept in a secure manner by Melissa Daoust. Researcher notes will be stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet at the home office of Melissa Daoust to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the data. Melissa Daoust, as the researcher, will retain copies of her notes indefinitely. This retention allows for the potential need to refer to the data during the analysis phase, addressing any queries that may arise or for the purpose of ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and it is entirely my choice to decide whether or not to continue with the study. I have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time.

If I choose to withdraw, the researcher will ensure that all data gathered from my participation until the time of withdrawal is promptly destroyed. To initiate the withdrawal process, I can contact the researcher using the contact information provided in this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387).

It is recommended that I keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____

Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Appendix D: Consent Form for Teachers (Observations and English Version Follows)

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Formulaire de consentement pour les enseignants

- Ce formulaire de consentement vise à obtenir la permission de l'enseignant(e) pour que la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, puisse observer et assister à des séances en classe lorsque le parent participant est présent et a accepté d'être observé. En signant ce formulaire, l'enseignant(e) reconnaît que certaines observations de ses interactions pourront également être effectuées.

Titre de l'étude : Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec

Nom de la chercheuse principale : Melissa Daoust, candidate au doctorat à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Nom de la directrice de recherche : Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, professeure agrégée à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

Courriel: [REDACTED]

Invitation à participer : Je suis invité(e) à participer à une étude de recherche intitulée "Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec". Cette étude est menée par Melissa Daoust dans le cadre de sa thèse de doctorat sous la supervision de la Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

But de l'étude : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les expériences des parents et des enseignants dans une école alternative au Québec, où la collaboration entre les familles et les enseignants est au cœur de la philosophie éducative. Par le biais d'une recherche narrative, cette étude examine les relations parents-enseignants, en mettant en lumière la façon dont les parents sont considérés comme co-éducateurs et co-gestionnaires de l'éducation de leurs enfants.

Au moyen d'entrevues approfondis enregistrés, d'observations et de journaux de réflexion, la recherche vise à comprendre comment ces partenariats influencent les expériences scolaires, la perception de la communauté et les approches de l'engagement famille-école.

Participation : Je suis invité(e) à autoriser la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, à observer mon rôle en classe et à m'assister. Les observations porteront sur la présence des parents dans ma classe ainsi que sur les relations entre les parents et les enseignant(e)s. Ces observations auront lieu à des moments convenus d'un commun accord avec le parent participant et la chercheuse. Je serai informé(e) des dates et des modalités des observations avant leur tenue.

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Risques : Ma participation à cette étude comporte des risques minimes. À tout moment, je peux demander à la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, de cesser les observations. J'ai le plein contrôle sur ce que je choisis de montrer et j'ai le droit de me retirer de l'étude à tout moment en demandant à la chercheuse de quitter ma classe. L'utilisation de pseudonymes servira à protéger mon identité.

Bienfaits : Ma participation pourrait enrichir mes pratiques pédagogiques et renforcer mes liens avec les parents. De plus, elle pourrait contribuer à favoriser l'engagement parental dans l'école et à améliorer les relations enseignant-parent dans les écoles alternatives. Enfin, cette étude pourrait bénéficier d'autres enseignants et futurs enseignants en développant des stratégies de collaboration avec les parents.

Confidentialité et vie privée : Les informations partagées resteront strictement confidentielles et seront utilisées uniquement à des fins académiques. Mon anonymat sera assuré par :

1. L'utilisation de pseudonymes.
2. La modification des noms d'écoles et d'organisations pour préserver l'anonymat.

Toutefois, en raison du contexte scolaire spécifique, l'anonymat complet ne peut être garanti.

Conservation des données : Les données collectées (notes de la chercheuse) seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Les notes seront entreposées dans un classeur verrouillé à son domicile. Melissa Daoust conservera ses notes indéfiniment pour assurer l'intégrité de l'étude.

Participation volontaire : Ma participation à cette étude est complètement volontaire. Je peux me retirer à tout moment sans conséquences. Si je me retire, toutes mes données seront immédiatement détruites.

Pour tout renseignement additionnel concernant cette étude, je peux communiquer avec la chercheuse ou sa directrice.

Pour tout renseignement sur les aspects éthiques de cette recherche, je peux m'adresser au Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche de Université d'Ottawa au (613) 562-5800 ext. 5387 ou ethique@uottawa.ca.

La chercheuse me recommande de conserver une copie du formulaire de consentement.

Acceptation : En signant mon nom ci-dessous, j'accepte de participer à cette étude de recherche.

Nom du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature de la chercheuse : _____ Date : _____

Consent Form for Teachers

- This consent form seeks the teacher's permission for the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to assist and observe their class when a participant-parent is present and has agreed to be observed. By signing, the teacher acknowledges that some observations of their interactions may also take place.

Title of the study: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec

Name of Principal Investigator: Melissa Daoust, Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. Email:

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. Email:

Invitation to Participate: I am being invited to participate in a research study entitled "A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec". This study is conducted by Melissa Daoust for her doctoral thesis and is under the supervision of Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of parents and teachers within an alternative school in Quebec, Canada, where collaboration between families and teachers is foundational to the education philosophy. Using narrative inquiry, this study delves into the complexities of parent-teacher relationships, examining how parents are positioned as co-educators and co-managers in their children's education. Through a series of in-depth, audio-recorded conversations with parents and teachers, along with observations and reflective journaling, the research seeks to illuminate how these partnerships shape educational experiences, perceptions of community, and broader understandings of family-school engagement.

Participation: I am being asked to allow the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to assist my class AND observe my participation in the classroom. Observations will focus on parents' presence in my classroom and the relationships between parents and teachers. These sessions will be scheduled at a mutually agreed-upon time with the parent-participant and the researcher, and I will be informed once they are confirmed.

Risks: My participation in this study involves minimal risks. At any moment, the observations might be stopped. I have complete control over what I choose to show. I have the option to withdraw at any point in time and ask the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to leave my classroom. The usage of pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

Benefits: My participation in this study will have the potential to generate meaningful insight to enhance my teaching practices and strengthen connections with parents. Additionally, my participation could contribute to fostering greater parental engagement within the school, offering perspectives on the teacher-parent partnerships that are central to the alternative school

model. Furthermore, this participation may assist other teachers and future teachers in developing collaboration with parents both within and beyond the classroom.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for academic purposes as outlined by the researcher. This includes the researcher's Ph.D. thesis, potential publication in academic journals and books, presentations, and teaching activities related to the research topic.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: (1) if I desire, pseudonyms will be assigned to me; (2) any names or places (including name of school and school board) will be altered to avoid any personal identification.

While the researcher, Melissa Daoust, will take all necessary steps to protect my anonymity, the specific school context and the nature of my involvement in the study make it impossible to guarantee complete anonymity.

Conservation of Data: The data collected (researcher notes) will be kept in a secure manner by Melissa Daoust. Researcher notes will be stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet at the home office of Melissa Daoust to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the data. Melissa Daoust, as the researcher, will retain copies of her notes indefinitely. This retention allows for the potential need to refer to the data during the analysis phase, addressing any queries that may arise or for the purpose of ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and it is entirely my choice to decide whether or not to continue with the study. I have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time.

If I choose to withdraw, the researcher will ensure that all data gathered from my participation until the time of withdrawal is promptly destroyed. To initiate the withdrawal process, I can contact the researcher using the provided contact information in this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387).

It is recommended that I keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name:	_____	Date:	_____
Participant's signature:	_____	Date:	_____
Researcher's signature:	_____	Date:	_____

Appendix E: Consent Form for Teachers (Interviews and English Version Follows)

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Formulaire de consentement pour les enseignants

Titre de l'étude : Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec

Nom de la chercheuse principale : Melissa Daoust, candidate au doctorat à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

([REDACTED])

Nom de la directrice de recherche : Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, professeure agrégée à la Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

([REDACTED])

Invitation à participer : Je suis invité(e) à participer à une étude de recherche intitulée "Une recherche narrative sur les expériences des parents dans une école alternative au Québec". Cette étude est menée par Melissa Daoust dans le cadre de sa thèse de doctorat sous la supervision de la Dre Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa.

But de l'étude : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les expériences des parents et des enseignants dans une école alternative au Québec, où la collaboration entre les familles et les enseignants est au cœur de la philosophie éducative. Par le biais d'une recherche narrative, cette étude examine les relations parents-enseignants, en mettant en lumière la façon dont les parents sont considérés comme co-éducateurs et co-gestionnaires de l'éducation de leurs enfants.

Au moyen d'entrevues approfondies enregistrées, d'observations et de journaux de réflexion, la recherche vise à comprendre comment ces partenariats influencent les expériences scolaires, la perception de la communauté et les approches de l'engagement famille-école.

Participation : Ma participation à cette étude consistera à réaliser des entretiens audio avec la chercheuse, Melissa Daoust, sur une période de quatre mois. Chaque entretien durera environ 40 minutes et aura lieu une fois par mois (quatre entretiens au total), à une date, une heure et un lieu convenus mutuellement.

Je pourrai partager mes expériences passées et actuelles au sein du système scolaire alternatif. Tous les entretiens seront enregistrés et transcrits. Si je le souhaite, je pourrai prendre des photos de lieux et de personnes importantes dans ma vie ou apporter un objet significatif lors des entretiens. Ces éléments aideront la chercheuse à mieux comprendre mon expérience. Aucune copie des photos ou objets ne sera conservée, et ceux-ci me seront retournés.

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Je pourrai aussi choisir d'autoriser la chercheuse à observer ma classe. Ces observations auront lieu à deux moments convenus d'un commun accord.

Je pourrai consulter la transcription des entretiens et donner mes commentaires par courriel ou en personne dans un délai de deux semaines suivant sa réception.

Risques : Les risques associés à ma participation à cette étude sont minimes. Je peux interrompre l'entretien à tout moment. J'ai le contrôle sur ce que je choisis de partager et je peux refuser de répondre à certaines questions ou me retirer de l'étude à tout moment. Mon identité sera protégée par l'utilisation de pseudonymes.

Bienfaits: Ma participation pourrait enrichir mes pratiques pédagogiques et renforcer mes liens avec les parents. De plus, elle pourrait contribuer à favoriser l'engagement parental dans l'école et à améliorer les relations enseignant-parent dans les écoles alternatives. Enfin, cette étude pourrait bénéficier d'autres enseignants et futurs enseignants en développant des stratégies de collaboration avec les parents.

Confidentialité et vie privée: Les informations partagées resteront strictement confidentielles et seront utilisées uniquement à des fins académiques (thèse de doctorat, publications, présentations et activités d'enseignement).

Mon anonymat sera assuré par :

1. La divulgation des informations uniquement avec mon consentement.
2. L'utilisation de pseudonymes si je le souhaite.
3. La modification des noms d'écoles et d'organisations pour préserver l'anonymat.

Toutefois, en raison du contexte scolaire spécifique, l'anonymat complet ne peut être garanti. Avant la diffusion des résultats, j'aurai l'opportunité de revoir et de modifier les données me concernant.

Conservation des données : Les données collectées (entretiens audio, transcriptions, notes de la chercheuse) seront conservées de manière sécurisée par Melissa Daoust. Les enregistrements seront protégés par mot de passe, et seuls Melissa Daoust et son superviseur y auront accès. Les documents imprimés seront entreposés dans un classeur verrouillé à son domicile. Les notes et enregistrements seront conservés indéfiniment pour assurer l'intégrité de l'étude.

Participation volontaire : Ma participation à cette étude est complètement volontaire. Je peux me retirer à tout moment sans conséquences. Si je me retire, toutes mes données seront immédiatement détruites.

Pour toute question, je peux contacter la chercheuse ou sa superviseure. Pour toute question éthique, je peux contacter le Bureau d'éthique de la recherche de l'Université d'Ottawa (ethics@uottawa.ca, 613-562-5800, poste 5387).

Je conserve une copie de ce formulaire pour mes dossiers.

Je souhaite participer en : (Veuillez cocher ✓ une case)

☐ Réalisant quatre entretiens enregistrés uniquement

☐ Réalisant quatre entretiens enregistrés et en permettant les observations en classe

Acceptation :

Nom du participant : _____

Date : _____

Signature du participant : _____

Date : _____

Signature de la chercheuse : _____

Date : _____

English Version

Consent Form for Teachers

Title of the study: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec

Name of Principal Investigator: Melissa Daoust, Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Invitation to Participate: I am being invited to participate in a research study entitled “A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Parents at an Alternative School in Quebec”. This study is conducted by Melissa Daoust for her doctoral thesis and is under the supervision of Dr. Marie-Hélène Brunet, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of parents and teachers within an alternative school in Quebec, Canada, where collaboration between families and teachers is foundational to the education philosophy. Using narrative inquiry, this study delves into the complexities of parent-teacher relationships, examining how parents are positioned as co-educators and co-managers in their children’s education. Through a series of in-depth, audio-recorded conversations with parents and teachers, along with observations and reflective journaling, the research seeks to illuminate how these partnerships shape educational experiences, perceptions of community, and broader understandings of family-school engagement.

Participation: My participation in this study will consist of audio-recorded conversations with the researcher, Melissa Daoust, over a 4-month time period. Each conversation will approximately take approximately 40 minutes. The frequency of these conversation will be monthly for a total of four conversations. The conversation will be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time, date, and place.

I am welcome to talk freely about my past and current experiences and stories of the alternative school system. All these conversations will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will be invited, if I want, to take photos of the important places and people in my life, or to bring an artefact which has a special meaning for me to our conversations. These photos and items will help the researcher to better understand my experiences. No copies of photos or items will be made and all the photos and items shared will be returned to me.

I will also be given the choice to allow the researcher, Melissa Daoust, to observe my class. I understand the classroom observations will take place in my classroom and will be scheduled at two different time at an agreed upon date and time.

I will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the conversations with the option of providing feedback by email or in person at an agree upon time, date, and place within two weeks of receiving the transcript.

Risks: My participation in this study involves minimal risks. At any moment, the conversation might be stopped. I have complete control over what I choose to share during the conversations. I

have the option to refuse to answer or withdraw at any point in time. The usage of pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

Benefits: My participation in this study will have the potential to generate meaningful insight to enhance my teaching practices and strengthen connections with parents. Additionally, my participation could contribute to fostering greater parental engagement within the school, offering perspectives on the teacher-parent partnerships that are central to the alternative school model. Furthermore, this participation may assist other teachers and future teachers in developing collaboration with parents both within and beyond the classroom.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for academic purposes as outlined by the researcher. This includes the researcher's Ph.D. thesis, potential publication in academic journals and books, presentations, and teaching activities related to the research topic.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: (1) any information that is obtained in this study will be disclosed only with my permission; (2) if I desire, pseudonyms will be assigned to me; (3) any names or places (including name of school and school board) will be altered to avoid any personal identification.

While the researcher, Melissa Daoust, will take all necessary steps to protect my anonymity, the specific school context and the nature of my involvement in the study make it impossible to guarantee complete anonymity. Before any findings are shared with a larger audience, I will have the opportunity to review, modify, or remove any material I wish.

Conservation of Data: The data collected (audio-recorded conversations, transcripts, and researcher notes) will be kept in a secure manner by Melissa Daoust. After transcription, electronic copies of interviews will be password-protected, and only Melissa Daoust will have access to them. Hardcopy interviews, transcripts, and researcher notes will be stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet at the home office of Melissa Daoust to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the data. Melissa Daoust, as the researcher, will retain copies of her notes and conversations indefinitely. This retention allows for the potential need to refer to the data during the analysis phase, addressing any queries that may arise or for the purpose of ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and it is entirely my choice to decide whether or not to continue with the study. I have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, and I can also choose not to answer any specific questions without facing any negative consequences.

If I choose to withdraw, the researcher will ensure that all data gathered from my participation until the time of withdrawal is promptly destroyed. To initiate the withdrawal process, I can contact the researcher using the provided contact information in this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of

Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387).

It is recommended that I keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

I am interested in participating by: (Please check ✓ one box)

☐ completing four audio-recorded conversations *only*

☐ completing four audio-recorded conversations *and* classroom observations

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____

Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____