

**Bad Words: Teenage Boys, the Vice-principal  
and the Discourses of Conflict in a Public High School**

**A Thesis Submitted to the  
Faculty and Graduate Studies and Research  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction  
University of Regina**

**by  
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Regina, Saskatchewan  
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## Abstract

This study is an examination of the language of two young men, their high school vice-principal and their guidance counselor. The young men were selected after having come into a verbal conflict with their female high school vice principal. The study presents three interviews, one between the guidance counselor and each young man, and one between the guidance counselor and vice-principal.

This thesis is framed by critical educational theory, which recognizes systems of privilege and power that advantage some people and disadvantage others. The work is also informed by feminist poststructural theory. Poststructural thought questions our taken for granted assumptions and the embedded patriarchy within them. Discourse is an important poststructural concept which is explored within this work. Discourses are the public and private language patterns that create and reflect cultural ways of thinking and being (Foucault, 1972; St. Pierre, 2000). The interviews in this thesis were analyzed using Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis steps of *description*, *interpretation*, and *explanation*.

Findings suggest that the language used by the young men—discourses of anger, blame, and powerlessness—expose a deep divide between what schools claim to offer (learning for all) and what these students have experienced (rejection). The teachers' language first reveals a traditional discourse of schooling which references power over students and a behavior/consequence framework. This discourse coexists with and conflicts with a social justice discourse. Both discourses contrast and overlap with discourses of womanliness.

Studying these discourses reveals that each conflict between the vice-principal and the student was a consequence of clashes between the contradictory discourses used by the student and school staff members, each discourse situated in (and also producing) power relations of age, gender, and socioeconomic class.

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## Chapter One — Introduction

“The true focus of revolutionary change is to see the piece of the oppressor inside us”  
(Lorde, 1983, p. 123).

### Autobiography

I was born a month early in a raging February blizzard in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, 36 years ago. My parents barely made the hospital in time, from a village few have ever heard of, thirty miles from the city. They made the trip in a beat up pick-up truck that belonged to their neighbor, because their car wouldn't start. I was named Corinne Adele Knelsen after a babysitter they once had for my older brother.

I was raised in a Mennonite village named Springfield and went to school two miles down the road in Wymark, Saskatchewan. Wymark is an uninviting place filled with falling down houses, the carcasses of cars. Springfield, though, is picturesque. It consists of twelve farms, side by side, along gently sloped road. The centerpiece is a clear pond across the fence from my parents' farm.

It was a great place to grow up. I have wonderful parents. I had three brothers, but one was killed when, uncharacteristically, he got in a car after drinking with some people he'd just met. That car was hit by a logging truck, and although he was carefully buckled in, Ken's spine was severed by the flying body of another passenger, killing him instantly. I still expect him to come walking through the door. He was almost 18. I miss him terribly.

I have always been surrounded by boys. Having all brothers, and even all boy cousins on one side, I grew up playing as one of them. One cousin showed up twenty-

four years after being born, because he was given up for adoption by my uncle and aunt as teenagers. Even this long-lost cousin was a boy. When I was a teenager, my mother encouraged me to put on mascara. I thought this ironic, because make-up had only been acceptable in my church for a short while at this time, given the following logic: "If the barn needs painting, paint the barn."

I became an English teacher, having become disgusted with Journalism school two weeks after starting and getting what I considered a bad mark. This was less than a month after my brother died. Besides, everyone from my hometown had assumed I would become a teacher like my father. The journalism thing was the closest I could come to rebellion since smoking, drinking, dancing, sex outside of marriage, and a lot of other "fun" things were not allowed in my religion and culture.

Teaching also was a good idea because I entered the Faculty of Education and met and fell in love with Greg Miller. We fell in love while thinking big thoughts. Greg and I soon had two little boys named Noah and Jake. They are 5 and 8, respectively. Having children is the best thing about my life. They are handsome and brilliant. Noah is sweet, kind, smart and a little goofy. Jake is funny, insightful, loud and strong willed. Is it okay to be a feminist whose sons are named after patriarchs?

I taught English Language Arts at Campbell Collegiate from 1996 - 2004. I always felt very alive while teaching, but was mostly faking enthusiasm for a lot of the available literature. Mostly I liked the students. Because I enjoy learning, I always assumed I would pursue a master's degree. When I began, I was interested in English Language Arts methods, but after my first year as Vice-principal, my interests changed.

I became an administrator simply because I wanted a larger classroom. I love kids, and I wanted to work with more of them. I wanted more influence over what was happening in the school. The job has lived up to expectation, although I don't work closely with more students. Instead I work daily with fewer but needier kids. They are the ones who get kicked out, who swear at teachers, who smoke pot. I really like them. I have only met one kid I didn't like, because he called me a whore and punched the wall beside me.

Let me tell you about my first two months on the job. I estimate that one student per hour was sent to my office for telling someone to fuck off, usually a teacher. There was a fight every day. One day I used up all of the surgical gloves in the office. We had four bleeders that day. One staff meeting afternoon, about 75 of our students decided to go over to another high school to "resolve" some issue from a party the weekend before. Many of our students went into the other school during class time looking for a student. Others of our students milled in the parking lot and across the street. Some were videotaping, just for fun. The other high school's staff had to lock their students into the classrooms until the police dispersed our students. Imagine how thrilled we were to hear the news. And see the footage.

Soon students from other schools heard about the fun, and large gangs from other schools began coming over to our front lawn. It was a break through to get them to fight down the street rather than on the front lawn so that we could protect our school's image. We asked the students why they fought. That's just the way we are, our students said. In a funny way, this was how they demonstrated school pride.

We needed to change our school culture. With the staff, we made an action plan to enhance students' sense of belonging in the school. It worked. The second half of the school year and the entire next school year saw very few and relatively minor fights. There were no large brawls. What remained was the regular use of inappropriate language by students, especially boys.

I have now moved to another high school. This school has a more stable student population, with more of them from a middle-class rather than working class background. But I continue to see students from the working class or poverty marginalized. These are the students whom I end up disciplining, suspending, and kicking out of school. With an expanding welfare and working class in our city, I expect to see more and more of these marginalized students in our schools. Our schools simply are not serving these students.

I have had many conversations with boys in which I have mildly confronted them about some behavior, looking to make use of a teachable moment. These conversations too often become angry and self-destructive events. The script usually goes like this.

Me: Hey, Johnny, what's this (language, behavior, wandering in the hall, smoking pot, writing graffiti, etc.) all about?

Boy: What do you mean?

Me: I mean this is not appropriate. We can't have this in school.

Boy: You can't tell me what to do (walking away).

Me: Actually I can. Why don't we talk about this?

Boy: Bitch.

Me: Pardon?

Boy: Listen you fuckin' bitch, get out of my face.

Me: You need to go home now. We'll talk about this after you get back from your suspension.

These damaging altercations have occupied my thoughts in my first years as an administrator. I'd like to know what's going on, and how to avoid them. My identities have directed me to deeper analysis of these conflicts. As a woman, I am curious about the impact of gender on these incidents. As a former English Language Arts teacher, I am interested in language. I know that words have layers of meanings. As a professional in a series of schools whose population reflects the growth in numbers of urban poor students, I am concerned about the disconnection I see between middle-class teachers and their poor or working class students. As a mother of two sons, I hope to be a part of the creation of a school system that truly embodies the concept of learning for all.

Taking a class in Critical Literacy with Meredith Cherland was a turning point. These studies in critical education theory, and now in feminist poststructuralism and critical discourse analysis, have given me new ways to think about these altercations.

Let's say a seemingly minor incident explodes into an episode of serious verbal or threatened physical abuse toward me or another staff member. The student is suspended or even "discontinued." Connell (1993) notes that "state power embodied in the school can become a foil for the construction of masculinity among...working class boys. Once locked into fighting authority via the school, they are, educationally speaking, the walking dead" (p. 25). Indeed, these working class boys sometimes seem to have no hope of success in my school. A. Luke (1995) says that "in the case of indigenous peoples, migrants, women, and working-class students, the historical movement has been from an outright namelessness and invisibility to an inclusion in public discourses and human

sciences as colonized, deficit human subjects...CDA [critical discourse analysis] can provide evidence of...exclusion and silencing of issues of difference” (p. 38).

Altercations between students and staff in schools have defied analysis using theories from counseling, educational psychology, and educational administration. I propose to use a different body of theory to understand these damaging encounters. Critical educational theory and feminist poststructural theory may have great potential to change the course of these encounters.

#### Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to look at language to explain how people see the world. I want to know more about how students who engage in conflict with me see things, and how I see things, so that I can understand more about how and why we have disagreed and come into conflict. I began this research in the hope that it might make it easier for us to get along together at school.

Therefore, this research is a critical study of the language which surrounds student-administrator conflicts in a public high school. The participants in this study are teenage boys who attended the public high school in which I served as Vice-principal, students who came into conflict with me in my role as Vice-principal, and who participated in an angry altercation with me which led to negative consequences for them. These angry altercations and their consequences caused me to wonder, “What happened here? Why did this happen?”

This research has three potential benefits. First, conflicts with administrators can have serious and long-term consequences for the education and development of students, and angry altercations often do lead to their banishment (official or unofficial) from the

school. My research may provide insights which could help to lower the incidence of suspensions and expulsions from school.

Second, this research may benefit public school administrators and others involved in leadership in urban public high schools, by reducing the instances of these damaging encounters and the accompanying feelings of failure and stress.

Third, society could benefit from this research. In my experience, students who experience frequent conflict with school authorities tend to leave school. These students may struggle to find employment, and also may encounter conflict with other authority figures in their lives. Insight into of these issues may make learning for all more possible, ultimately to society's benefit.

## Chapter Two — Review of the Literature

Whether it be a raindrop (a raindrop that was about to fall but froze, giving birth to a beautiful icicle), be it a bird that sings, a bus that runs, a violent person on the street, be it a sentence in a newspaper, a political speech, a lover's rejection, be it anything - we must adopt a critical view, that of the person who questions, who doubts, who investigates, and who wants to illuminate the very life we live (Freire, 1985).

### Introduction

In my daily work as a high school vice-principal in a community school, I see that what we are doing—the way schools are built, the way our time is structured, the way teachers teach and evaluate, the way students are expected to move, speak, act, think, and dress, the way I discipline the unruly—is grossly failing a large group of students. These students are the poor, the parentless, and the minorities. Critical educational theory, poststructural feminism, and critical discourse analysis have struck three harmonious chords that, for me, have increasingly become a way to make sense of this reality in my daily practice. They also suggest possibilities for changing it.

In this chapter, I will review literature that defines, explains and illustrates critical educational theory, poststructural feminism, and critical discourse analysis. These three orientations to research, each of which holds within it both theory and method, will ground my research.

### Critical educational theory and critical literacy

First, my research will draw upon critical educational theory, which recognizes systems of privilege and power that advantage some people and disadvantage others. Paulo Freire's (1970) work was central to advancing critical literacy. His ideas are rooted in the concepts of praxis (reflection paired with action that transforms the world) and meaningful student inquiry. Freire powerfully demonstrated that the teaching of literacy

could promote, in oppressed peoples of the world, consciousness of issues of power and privilege. He taught students not only to read the literal text on the page (with remarkable speed and success), but also to read the text of the world they lived in, and then to have the ability to change that world to better meet their needs.

Critical literacy, then, teaches people to understand the social forces that shape their lives, and to confront social injustices, with a hope of emancipation from oppression. I would like my research to illuminate the social forces at work in my disciplinary interactions with students.

Critical theory values an exploration of the taken for granted in education. Michael Apple's (1993) work helps drive this exploration forward. He asks, "Whose knowledge is taught? Why is it taught in this particular way to this particular group?" He challenges the legitimacy of unequal power relations, showing how "the selection and organization of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups" (p. 56).

Following in the line of Freire and Apple, I hope to do research that disturbs the surface of the known and the taken for granted in my school, and attempts to answer, "Whose interests are served by the failure of these students? Whose voices are privileged and whose are silenced?"

In my career, which began in 1996, I have seen an increased focus on testing and "results." As Comber (2006) explains, it has been difficult for teachers of my generation to recognize a need, let alone to "be overtly critical, to frontload one's social justice agenda in curriculum initiatives and to politicize the language classroom" (2006, p. 4). Promoting social justice has only seldom been part of the professional conversation of

my career. Rather, our focus on results causes us to blame the victim. I now believe, “we are, in fact, in danger of forgetting the decades of hard work it took to put even a limited vision of equality on the social and educational agenda and of forgetting the reality of the oppressive conditions that exist for so many” (Apple, 1993, p. 41). We need a more critical view of curriculum, and schools, and whose interests they are serving.

Why study language? Language is related to power. It reflects and shapes power relationships. Words are "powerful tools that maintain a social hegemony where the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have the power" (Delpit, 1995 in Mahar, 2001, p. 201). For many "bright yet marginalized adolescents...race, gender, and social class...keep them from accessing the codes necessary to succeed in the dominant social and academic discourse communities of...school" (Mahar, 2001, p. 201).

Further, many high school teachers are teaching "ghosts". The students have changed—indeed our world has changed—but our expectations remain the same; we teach as though students have the same lives and skills as we did decades ago. Our programs are designed for students who have two parents at home, who have time and space for homework, students who can read and write well in the dominant discourse, and read and write independently, at the high school level. In fact, teens read less than their counterparts of 30 years ago, and many choose not to read at all (Brozo & Hargis, 2003). As a group, minority youth, in particular, are suffering from lower reading ability (Ogbu, 1994 in Brozo & Hargis, 2003).

The real politic makes this situation even more complex. A paradox has emerged; a wide range of student ability conflicts with a political milieu in which accountability

measures are ever more fashionable. As a result, "although we know that students in classrooms are increasingly diverse, and society's needs more complex, the challenge of evaluation has, paradoxically, narrowed the range of instructional approaches in the classroom" (Begoray, 2002, p. 6). I have seen curriculum and teaching practice alienate the disengaged youth that I repeatedly discipline for the behaviors that disengagement causes.

Have we allowed the trend toward accountability to prevent us from addressing the real needs in front of us? Michael Apple (1993) provides at least part of the answer. "The selection and organization of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups" (p. 56).

Whose interests, then, are served by the failure of particular groups of students? Perhaps those of white middle-class teachers whose world views can go unchallenged. Perhaps those of the wealthy, whose wealth is made possible by the poverty of others.

We must teach students to ask these very questions of justice, power and privilege. We must, ourselves, ask these questions. Is it possible to bring the interests of those in power together with those who are dominated? Apple (1993) says that, "not only are people successful in creating some space where such contradictory values can indeed 'echo, reverberate, and be heard,' but they can transform the entire social space" (p. 57). It is my hope that my research will help teachers and administrators create this transformed "third" space.

We must follow marginalized students (both literally and figuratively) "beyond the classroom walls, into their communities, and even well beyond the official time frames of our research" (Hynds & Appleman, 1997 in Mahar, 2001). Barillas (2000), for

example, found great success in engaging parents in their children's literacy through interactive assignments that required both children and parents to write compositions about identity. Parents were encouraged to write in their first language; their child translated for the class. The resulting poems and stories, published in a class book, provided a wonderful learning experience about culture, gender, and writing for students, parents, and teacher. In cases such as these, where it is recognized that students bring their own “classed, raced, religious, and gendered biographies with them, and where students are active constructors of the meanings of the education they encounter” (Apple, 2003, p. 61), the transformation toward a socially just school space begins to occur.

Where students' voices have been silenced, it is often done, I believe, without ill intention. In my experience, most teachers and administrators have good intentions for all of their students, but lack understanding of the barriers in students' lives. According to Bell (1997), “power consists not only in a person or group in power unilaterally imposing its will on another person or group, but rather an ongoing system that is mediated by well-intentioned people acting as agents of oppression, usually unconsciously, by simply going about their daily lives” (11). Yet “any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence...to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire, 1970, p. 85). Therefore, for pedagogical practice to be empowering for all students, every student's presence must be acknowledged. All voices must be heard.

The challenge of my leadership, through this study and through my every day practice, is to move my high school from “the last bastion of segregation” (Johnson, personal communication, 2005) and a place that reinforces domination to a place where

all students are seen as individuals and interacted with according to their needs (Bell, 1997). One way to begin to make this move is to think and experience life *with* marginalized students. This “thinking with” rather than “thinking about” requires much energy, courage, and love (Freire, 1970).

### Feminist poststructural theory

In addition to critical educational theory, feminist poststructural theory will also inform this study. Poststructuralism relies in part on the work of Michael Foucault, a French social theorist, who challenged structuralist and humanist paradigms (eg. Jean Piaget, Noam Chomsky) in the social sciences. Poststructuralism questions humanist beliefs about “rationality and scientific reason, the autonomous transcendental individual, the veracity and transparency of language, and the truth of knowledge, and the telos of progressive accounts of history” (Luke in Guzzetti, 2002, p. 188). Therefore, poststructural thought challenges nearly all we take for granted, because humanist assumptions shape almost everything about our western world—in Elizabeth St. Pierre’s words, “the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we can imagine, the limits of our pleasure” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478).

Feminists like St. Pierre have adapted poststructuralist thought to deconstruct (take apart and rebuild rather than to tear down) accepted views of history and the embedded patriarchy in taken-for-granted thought. Poststructural thought rejects the high hard road of “history” and replaces it with a dynamic blend of multiple, overlapping and

contradictory “histories”. Likewise, knowledge and power are infused with contradictions, becoming multifaceted and diffuse.

Discourse is an important poststructural feminist concept. Discourses are public and private language patterns that create and reflect cultural ways of thinking and being (Foucault, 1972; St. Pierre, 2000). Feminist poststructural theory sees language as distorting rather than transparent. St. Pierre (2000) notes in explaining Derrida that “the thing itself always escapes, that absence rather than presence, and difference rather than identity produce the world,” and that understanding this “demands that we examine our own complicity in the maintenance of social injustice” (p. 484). Building upon feminist poststructural theory, especially its views of language and discourses, I will assume that language is the site where the reality of my days at school is constructed.

This research will also take account of feminist poststructuralist explanations of subjectivity, “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1998, p. 32). In short, subjectivity is a sense of oneself, an identity which is constructed through interaction with available cultural discourses. This research studies language as the place where subjectivity is constructed, in order to unveil the discourses that people use to construct their own subjectivities, and to place themselves in relation to others. It is only when one can name the discourses and practices of oppression, that one can begin to refuse them (St. Pierre, 2000).

#### Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (or CDA) is a research method that grows out of critical theory and sociolinguistics. James Gee (1992; 2000) likens discourses to “identity

kits,” which include ways of thinking, acting, and speaking and identify individuals as part of a group. Critical discourse analysis “demonstrates the ways in which discourse defines and positions human subjects, constructing ‘truths’ about the world” (Cherland & Harper, 2007). CDA examines the role of language in creating and maintaining systems of power (Luke, 1995). Rather than defining how people construct texts, CDA reveals how texts construct and sort people. CDA demonstrates how minority discourses are written out and written over by the discourses of privilege.

The analysis in this study will follow Fairclough’s (1989) procedures for CDA, based on a three step process. The first step is description, a detailed account of the language (vocabulary, level of formality, grammar, textual structures) used by the subjects. The second step is interpretation, a description of discourse processes and their background assumptions. The third step is an explanation of the power relations and ideologies that drive the discourses and situate the participants within the broader contexts of the situation, the institution, and the society. CDA makes connections between a micro-analysis of language in use and a macro-analysis of power relations and society (Fairclough, 1989; Luke, 1995). CDA is unique in its recursive ability to capture both the macro and the micro, and in its power to focus on identity work toward advocacy (Luke, 1995). I will provide more detail about CDA procedures in the Methods Chapter.

#### Example studies in CDA

##### Example one.

This research will follow a number of studies where CDA has been used to study the educational problems of teenagers (Gee & Crawford, 1998; Gee, 2000; Rogers,

2002). Three studies are described in what follows. First, Gee and Crawford (1998) use CDA to study "two teenage girls making sense of their lives in interviews" (p. 225). Their main concern in this study is to see what different "kinds" of teenagers can tell us about how social class shapes language and identity.

This research evaluates the discourses of two teenage girls, one from the working class and one from upper middle class. The analysis uses three tools (first person statements, motifs, and narrative analysis) to reveal how the participants' identities, or their master stories, while always under revision, differ significantly according to their social class. These girls live in very different worlds. Yet regardless of social class, they reveal their distrust in language as straightforwardly representing the world.

The first person statements used by the subjects reveal the first difference between these "kinds" of teenagers. Sandra is a fourteen-year-old girl from a working class family who lives in an economically-challenged urban area. When Sandra speaks as an "I," she uses affective statements 31% of the time. Affective statements include expressions of feelings and hopes. 13% of the time, she uses cognitive statements, expressions of knowledge or claims.

Emily, the second subject, is a fifteen-year-old girl from an upper-middle class family who lives in a wealthy suburban area. When Emily speaks as an "I," she makes cognitive statements 31% of the time, and affective statements 13% of the time. This reveals an interesting contrast, with Emily more comfortable in the realm of knowledge and Sandra more comfortable in the realm of emotion.

The content of their statements is as revealing as the type. The motifs that emerge in Sandra's speech are disconnection, not caring, and language and laughter. In contrast,

Emily's motifs are activities and achievement, assessments, and evaluative speech. These motifs are reinforced through the narratives that each girl tells.

Gee and Crawford conclude that Emily, the upper-middle class girl, defines herself as being connected to school and other public institutions, and extrapolates her experience into the future imagining her "life trajectory through achievement space as defined by school" (p. 242). Sandra, the working class girl, sees her core self as disconnected from school, cut off from this achievement space, and even defined in opposition to such public institutions as school. Where Emily identifies with knowledge, assessment of others and achievement, Sandra values laughter, and the effect others have on her.

Because schools represent language as literal and transparent, they cannot capture the loyalties of these girls. Accordingly, school becomes a site of class struggle, because these girls have identities that are defined, at least in part, against each other. Their language usage reveals that different social classes have different ways of thinking, acting, and being. Gee and Crawford (1998) call for an opportunity for students to rework and reword their identities, free from the constrictions of gender and social class.

Example two.

Gee (2000) reinforces these findings with another exploration of two kinds of teenagers. He describes the "new times" that these teenagers find themselves in, a new global capitalism based on design, marketing and identity which requires "shape-shifting portfolio people" to fuel it (p. 414). Gone is the old industrial capitalism which was based on mass production. Gee questions how schools are equipping students for these new times.

This research juxtaposes interviews with three teenagers from working-class families with three teenagers from upper middle class families. Literacy is intertwined with identity, and therefore affects every aspect of these teens' lives. Gee once again analyses the teenagers' I-statements and use of narrative to find that working-class teens' language reveals a social and affective world, while upper middle-class teens' language reveals a world of knowledge, argumentation, and achievement. Where working-class teens' language in these interviews is structured around concrete story-telling, upper middle-class teens' language is centred around abstract argument.

Social languages are “specific ways with words [that] are fully integrated with specific ways of thinking, believing, valuing, acting, interacting, and often, ways of coordinating and being coordinated by other semiotic systems, other people, various objects, tools, settings, and technologies” (Gee, 2000, p. 413). Gee demonstrates how these teens use different social languages which correspond to their social class, and that their uses of these languages have profound consequences for their success in school and society.

In this study, upper middle class teens' speech clearly echoes the discourses of professional life, schools, and the public sphere. These students are on the path to becoming the “shape shifters” needed in the new capitalism. Contrarily, working class teens seem to speak from an experience less permeated by school-based and public-sphere discourses. Gee argues that this difference is so because these teens experience less dialogue with authority figures; rather their experience of these discourses is of de-contextualized rules and facts. According to Gee, these working-class teens may face a dire future in the face of a disappearing stable working class.

### Example three.

Rogers (2002) uses CDA to explore conflict between personal and institutional literacies. This study shows how, for a poor, urban, minority family, difficulty negotiating in the institutional discourses of public education can have damaging effects. This research employs the framework of primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourse is acquired in one's home and immediate community. The secondary discourse includes ways of speaking, thinking and being at school. This secondary discourse is learned rather than acquired. When there are conflicts between the discourses, the literature suggests that children may fail to do well in school. Likewise, children whose discourses are aligned tend to do well (Gee, 1992).

Some theorists see this prediction as too neat (Rogers cites Delpit, 1996). Indeed, in spite of congruence between primary and secondary discourses, members of this family (particularly the mother) come to see themselves as failures in literacy endeavors.

While the mother, June, helps her daughter, Vicki, with homework, even confidently extending the curriculum at home and communicating with teachers, once within the institution of the school, she is unable to express her views to challenge school authorities. The gap in communication and power is so large that the subject's daughter is placed in special education against her will. June has adopted the assumption that her own literacy is worthless within the institution of the school. Rogers' analysis suggests that differences in ideology are more important than differences in language usage in explaining why children from non-mainstream homes fail to do well in school.

What interests me most about Rogers' study is her analysis of her own discourses while interacting with June and Vicki. She recognizes that she influences the outcomes of

the study (even participating in a meeting about program placement for Vicki) by bringing her own cultural models into the mix. As a critical researcher, I too intend to adopt this reflexivity, “turning the analytical framework on the work of the researcher” (p. 267).

### Conclusion

It is our most mundane tasks and words that create and reinforce the larger culture, the discourses, the policies and practices in our schools. Critical discourse analysis has the ability to show the power relations at work in everyday talk. Only by revealing these power relations can we hope to work toward equality. Language is central in all we do. Allan Luke (1995) explains that

language, text, and discourse are the very media by and through which teaching and learning and the very writing and discussion of research occur. Not only is there no space outside of discourse. There are no means of educational description, classification, and practice outside of discourse. It is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to talk or write about mind and behavior, belief and value, and policy and practice without a social analysis of language (Luke, 1995, p. 40).

Recent studies in CDA have begun to take into account a poststructural view of language as the site where reality is both reflected and constructed. Discourse is complex and unpredictable. Absences and silences (Derrida, 1980; C. Luke in Guzetti, 2002) can be as important as what is said, and have powerful political consequences.

CDA has been criticized for its overt political nature. And some see it as a weakness that CDA is a hybrid of feminist theory, linguistics, and sociology, because the research which uses CDA is not “pure” or easily classified. In my research, however, I

intend to reject such notions of “purity.” It is the very messiness of language that gives CDA its power to accomplish rich analysis and work for social change.

In addition, CDA is still seen as a new method. To date, too much of CDA has had a negative focus. The challenge for CDA is to move beyond critique to mark an emancipatory use of power in the face of these new times (A. Luke, 1995). That is my challenge too.

## Chapter Three — Methodology

CDA might be used to demonstrate what *could* be, and what *ought* to be. (Cherland & Harper, 2007, p. 200)

### Theoretical foundations of the methodology

Lather (1991), extending the work of Habermas (1971), suggests that there are four broad theoretical paradigms for qualitative advocacy research. These are positivist, interpretive, critical, and poststructuralist. Each offers a different way of gathering and presenting information, a different way of knowing. Each paradigm presents a distinct approach “to generating and legitimating knowledge...[and] different views of knowledge and power, of justice and injustice, and of how injustice can be remedied” (Cherland & Harper, 2007, p. 9). In this section, I summarize these four paradigms, to situate my research in relation to them. I explain what I have tried to do, and what I *have not* tried to do.

The first category of research is the positivist paradigm. According to Lather (1991), prediction is the purpose of positivist research. The positivist view is centred on an acceptance of Truth as objective and universal. One’s knowledge then is the sum of one’s discovery of this Truth. Application of Truth by a wise administrator leads to justice. For example, one might use research to discover a set of laws; by the application of these laws, one can predict certain outcomes. Justice will be served by uncovering and applying these laws (Cherland & Harper, 2007). In the positivist paradigm, language does not really exist as a separate entity. It is more like the air we breathe. It is seen to be

transparently representing reality, but not having an impact on constructing reality. One can say what one means.

The second category of research is the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive researcher seeks understanding (Lather, 1991). Knowledge and power are socially constructed, and the human self is produced in relation to other people. The researcher seeks to listen and to understand the lived experience of the participants. Interpretive research sees language as a medium, then, to understanding the participants' realities (Cherland & Harper, 2007).

Next is the critical view. The purpose of critical research is emancipation (Lather, 1991). In this paradigm, the researcher works to "change the world by exposing and shattering systems of privilege and power" (Cherland & Harper, 2007, p. 11). Here, what counts as true and right is tied to power and privilege. The self is an intersection of political and historical categories such as race, class, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

Finally, there is the poststructural paradigm. In poststructuralist thought, reality and truth are multiple. Language and discourse are central to the production of reality and truth. The purpose of the researcher is to challenge accepted "truth," to unsettle the taken for granted. Both poststructural and critical thought have been described more fully in the previous chapter of this thesis. Again, in this research, my view of language is always poststructural.

Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre (2005) distinctly explain the poststructural view of language:

Poststructuralism links language, subjectivity, social organization, and power. The centerpiece is language. Language does not "reflect" social reality but rather

produces meaning and creates social reality. Different languages and different discourses within a given language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another. Language is how social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where one's sense of self—one's subjectivity—is constructed. Understanding language as competing discourses—competing ways of giving meaning and organizing the world—makes language a site of exploration and struggle (p. 961).

While having interpretive qualities and a method (CDA) that has been seen by some as positivist, my research fits best within the critical and poststructural categories. An example may be useful. Going back to my original research problem, having to regularly discipline students for swearing at teachers, the positivist researcher might collect and use broad statistics to measure or to predict this behavior. That is not my intention. In fact, this study does not claim to be positivist in any way. CDA sometimes has been seen as positivist because of its technical treatment of language. And indeed linguistic concepts have sometimes been seen as fixed, stable and unchanging—and they have sometimes been used in positivist ways.

I do use linguistic concepts, and this study is focused on language. Language is the medium of our discourses, our “identity kits” (Gee, 1992; 2000). But mine is not a view of language as precise, transparent, neutral, or as naming reality, as it would be in positivism. Rather, I see language as messy. It is never settled. It is constantly shifting. Discourse “can never be just linguistic since it organizes a way of thinking and acting in the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485). I may count the times a word or metaphor is used as a way to name a discourse or to note a perceived shift in discourse. But I do not see reality as expressed through this “counting” or measuring.

Again, going back to the problem of the regular discipline of students who use inappropriate language in school, the interpretive researcher would seek to describe,

interpret, and understand the “offending” students’ experiences, and their motivations for this behavior. This understanding might result from in-depth interviews and observations of a few students, and careful study of the themes that emerge. The researcher would interpret and present the ways in which the participants see the world. In this study, I have indeed tried to interpret the participants’ lived experiences. I have attempted to represent their worldviews, but through a linguistic analysis. And I have tried to go further than simply representing what they think and feel (interpretive), to explore the larger systems of privilege and power that require them (although often unbeknownst to them) to think and feel and behave in certain ways (a critical view). In addition, my post-structural view of language separates my research from the interpretive paradigm.

While trying to situate my research within these paradigms (it is this, it is not this), I would like to surface a contradiction of sorts. Poststructural thought rejects this kind of dualistic thinking. We can never fully understand or classify the chaos of lived experience into categories. There are always overlapping and contradictory elements. Our attempts to ascribe meaning can only ever be a “temporary retrospective fixing” (Weedon, 1998, p. 25). Thus, “we can never know exactly what something means—we can never get to the bottom of things” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 482).

Discussion of poststructuralism calls for mention of structuralism. Structuralism began in the 1960s with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He is the father of semiotics, the study of cultural signs. For the structuralist, language connects a meaning to a sound; this relationship is arbitrary. Meaning can be found within the structure of the whole language, as words gain meaning in relation to other words, rather than in the analysis of individual words. While they construct our experience (we cannot understand

or express experience outside of language), linguistic structures cannot be controlled. However, we can uncover and name these structures (Campbell, 1993). I agree that experience is constructed by language. Yet my research is poststructural rather than structural in its view that any final or complete interpretation of language or experience is impossible.

#### Context of the study

This research took place in the context of Michael James Collegiate (all names of schools, staff and students are pseudonyms). Michael James Collegiate (MJC) is a small urban high school which draws students both from a suburban area north of central Regina as well as from the north central inner city area. Students from the suburban area are typically middle class, while students' families from the inner city tend to be working class or working poor.

MJC has experienced a population decline over the last few years. During the time of this study, its population was between 400 and 450 students, down from between 700 and 800 students about five years before. While this study was being conducted, MJC was cited for closure by the local school board, but due to pressure from the community (especially from vocal parents living in the suburban area north of the school), MJC remained open. School population decline at the time of this study is a city-wide phenomenon due to an aging populace and out-of-province migration.

Regina, the capital city of Saskatchewan, is located in southern Saskatchewan and is home to approximately 199,000 people. The local media often characterize the north central part of Regina as the worst section of the city, having higher rates of crime, poverty, violence, and gang activity than the rest of the city. At the time of this writing,

Regina has the second highest per capita homicide rate in Canada in cities of populations between 100,000 and 500,000. A large proportion of the city's Aboriginal population lives in the north central area. Recently, this area was described in Maclean's, a national news magazine, as "The Worst Neighborhood in Canada."

### Participants

Several teenage boys who had been involved in an angry altercation with me in my role as Vice-principal were invited through a letter to participate in the study. There was a gap of at least three months between the altercation and the invitation to take part in the study for each participant. If they wished to express their interest, potential participants then contacted our school's guidance counselor, and planned a time to meet for the interview. I selected three of these boys, but only two completed their interviews. The third participant agreed to be interviewed but did not attend a scheduled meeting.

Both student participants were no longer students at MJC at the time of the interview or the subsequent analysis. It is interesting and of concern that, even though the interviews took place within a few months of their recorded conflicts with me (during which time they were regularly attending and seemingly fully engaged in the school), both boys dropped out of school in their Grade 12 year.

The subject of the first interview is "Mitchell Banks". (This is a pseudonym, as are all the other names used in this study.) At the time of the interview, Mitchell was an 18-year-old white youth who lived in the north central part of the city with his mother, a single parent. The Banks family belongs to the working poor, and Mitch worked many hours a week at a local fast food restaurant to help make ends meet. He was looking for a better job, one that would allow him to move out on his own and support himself,

something his sister had recently done. Mitch told me that her moving had helped the family to be more financially and emotionally stable. On the day of Mitch's interview, he had come in to MJC to withdraw from school so that he could devote himself fully to working. Mitch's life and participation in this project were also deeply influenced by his girlfriend, Sarah.

The subject of the second interview is "Graham Wolf." At the time of the interview, Graham, an eighteen-year-old aboriginal youth, was living in the north central part of Regina with his mother, step-father and brother. Graham's parents have steady jobs. Graham expressed a distance between himself and his parents, as well as a sense of protectiveness over his brother. Graham also worked many hours a week at a local restaurant, and expressed a desire to move out on his own. Like Mitch, Graham's school experience and life were influenced by a close relationship with a girlfriend.

Soon after his interview, Graham withdrew from MJC to enter Regina Public Adult Campus, a program that is designed to meet the needs and life demands of adult students. One year later, he remains a student there and is working towards his Grade 12 diploma. Graham and I developed a close relationship when he participated in a break dance and hip hop team under my supervision. In my current school, Graham volunteers as a break dance instructor, again under my supervision.

It had been my wish and intention to complete the interviews with the student participants myself. I felt I had developed a comfortable and open relationship with each young man, and I welcomed an opportunity to formally review the altercations with them. I was certain that they would welcome this opportunity as well. I was also certain that each conversation would be a rich source of data for my study.

However, upon review of my initial research proposal, the university's Research Ethics Board did not agree. Because of my position of authority over the student participants, I was approved for my research only if a more neutral third party could complete the interviews. (This view is ironic, because as a high school vice-principal, reviewing and discussing conflict with students typically made up the majority of my day.) Nevertheless, the interviews were conducted by the third participant in the study, "Courtney Thompson," a guidance counselor at MJC. Courtney is a middle aged white woman who has taught at MJC for 9 years, and has been teaching for 13 years. The student interviews took place in the school guidance office, and each lasted approximately one hour. While initially disappointed that I could not conduct the interviews, I am grateful for Courtney's participation and for the added dimension she brought to the data.

I am the fourth participant in the study.

### Interviews

Courtney conducted the boys' interviews in the guidance office at MJC. She audio taped each interview. Each interview began with Courtney reading aloud my written recollection of the angry altercation that had occurred between the participant and me. Courtney then asked each boy to speak of his recollections of the altercation, and to talk about life at school. Courtney had a series of questions which I had provided, but I encouraged her to feel free to pose her own follow up questions. I then transcribed and analyzed both interviews using critical discourse analysis.

Courtney then interviewed me. Courtney used a series of questions designed to explore my recollection of each altercation, and my thoughts about it. Courtney and I did

not stick closely to the question and answer format, but rather treated the interview as a conversation, asking each other questions and following lines of thought as they occurred. This conversation took place in my school office and lasted nearly two hours.

Once the interviews were complete, I transcribed the interviews and began the analysis. Each chapter of the analysis of the boys' interviews (one chapter for each participant) begins with an italicized written recollection of our angry altercation. This recollection is followed by a brief description of my understanding of the background of the altercation and of my prior knowledge of the student's experience at school, as well as some general context for the interview.

These background and context descriptions are necessarily brief. The altercations themselves occurred before my research began, and I had no detailed record of what was said or any other minutiae of the surrounding context (nor ethically could I keep such a record, given my position of authority over the boys). What I wrote was from my memory, and this was presented to the student participants for their responses. Nor was I present for their interviews. Therefore, I could not record or review any particulars of body language, facial expression, or the other clues that might give me insight into the experiences of the participants. During my analysis, I often wished for these details. All I had was sound and silence. However, it is important to remember that the focus of this study is language, and what the participants' language has to tell us about their lived experience and their identities, through their discourses.

To explore the language of the interviews, I employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method is especially appropriate within my theoretical framework. Critical educational theory questions assumptions and taken for granted beliefs, language, and

actions in our schools. It examines the relations of power at work, and the ways in which some groups are privileged and others are dominated. Similarly, feminist poststructural theory challenges accepted wisdom, and opposes the notion that language is transparent and neutral. Rather, language can be used to manipulate or misrepresent truth. And truth itself is multifaceted and contradictory.

CDA makes connections between a micro-analysis of language in use and a macro-analysis of power relations and society (Fairclough, 1989; A. Luke, 1995). Accordingly, CDA allowed me to demonstrate these distortions, and to show how the discourses of privilege can overwrite those of minority speakers. By exploring the language (eg. the words, the images, the silences, and the thought patterns) of the participants, I was able to name a number of discourses at work. I do not claim to be a neutral observer or analyst during this process. I found this process of analysis to be profoundly personal and even emotionally difficult at times. I was surprised by the clarity with which I could see the oppression of the students, and even how I had participated in creating and sustaining that oppression. Naming these discourses and practices of oppression will, I hope, be the first step in learning to refuse them.

While attempting to refuse these practices, I must also acknowledge that much work in CDA “continues to use positivist, rational, and enlightenment modes of meaning. It claims to be a scientific discourse, and it assumes the possibility of an ideal order outside of ideology” (Pennycook, 2001 in Cherland & Harper, 2007, p. 199). Another limitation of CDA is a tendency to a negative focus, rather than a productive focus, on the consequences of ideology and social structures. It is not that CDA presupposes a negative focus, but rather that this is how CDA has been used; “CDA

might be used to demonstrate what could be, and what ought to be” (Cherland & Harper, 2007, p. 200).

### Analysis of Data

CDA, my research method, was briefly described in the previous section of this chapter. The first step of analysis in CDA is *description* (Fairclough, 1989). Description involves a detailed account of the grammatical features of the language used by the subjects. Choosing from a long list of linguistic features, I examine the metaphors and euphemisms in the text. I also describe the level of formality of the language that is used. Next, I analyze how active or passive the text constructions are. I ask, are ideas formed as questions or imperatives? What logical connectors do the subjects use to link their thoughts? Finally, I review textual structures such as turn-taking.

To help me to analyze the participants’ language, I made notes on the transcripts. From these notes, I began to make charts which record significant phrases used in the interviews. These charts helped me to see patterns in the participants’ language. In the analysis of the language of each interview, I have selected only a few aspects of the description upon which to focus, presenting them in a chart. Following Gee and Crawford (1998), I term these aspects “snapshots.” I selected these snapshots after searching the data for points of tension and for patterns. It is my hope that these snapshots, as well as the charts, will help to convey information quickly to the reader. The content of each chart is then more fully explored to complete the analysis. It is not my intention, however, to convey the idea that the participants’ experience can be neatly charted and therefore explained.

The second step in the critical discourse analysis is interpretation (Fairclough, 1989). Interpretation concerns itself with discourse processes and their background assumptions. Specifically, this step makes several things visible: first, the interpretation(s) participants ascribe to the context of the exchange; second, the type or types of discourse the participants are drawing upon; and third, the ways in which these interpretations are different for each participant (possibly even changing during the course of the interaction). Coming more closely to the point of CDA, “the stage of interpretation corrects delusions of autonomy on the part of subjects in discourse. It makes explicit what for participants is generally implicit: the dependence of discourse practice on the unexplicated common sense assumptions of MR [members’ resources]i and discourse type” (Fairclough, p. 163).

The third and final step in critical discourse analysis is explanation. And what must be explained? The power relations that make possible these interpretations; the ideologies that make an “ordinary” conversation a “site of social struggle” (Fairclough, p. 163).

Three areas in particular need to be explored. First, what power relations help to shape the participants’ discourses? Second, what ideologies are the participants drawing upon? Third, how are the participants’ discourses situated within the broader contexts of the struggles within the situation, the institution, and the society? Further, are these struggles overt or covert? Does this situation fit the expected pattern of power relations for the participants? Does this situation sustain or transform power relations? (Fairclough, p. 167).

The analysis I am about to present involved multiple readings of the data, note taking, and coding. While writing this study, I cyclically re-read the data, re-read sample studies and theoretical foundational writings, and re-read my analysis.

To summarize, close analysis of the text of our conversations reveals our power relations and ideologies. CDA has helped me to examine the “common sense” assumptions I and others hold about the students and power relations in my school. These common sense assumptions make possible the exercise of power. I believe these common sense assumptions, both mine and the students’, are at the root of the student-administrator conflicts that occupied my mind during my first year as a school administrator.

## Chapter Four – Mitch Banks

*“Blaming it all on me.”*

### The Red Paint Incident

*Sitting and doing paperwork in my office on what has been a quiet afternoon, I am troubled by female voices rising in distress right outside my door. Worried that it might be an argument that could escalate into a fight, I jump up and round the corner to find a surprising tableau.*

*Two girls are kneeling over a spreading glossy pool of red paint on the white floor. A plastic paint bottle lies on its side on the floor beside a cart loaded with other art supplies. I watch as the girls’ alarm turns to amusement. They giggle nervously as they see me, open the paint bottle and try to scoop the paint back into it with their hands, now laughing with the impossible task.*

*“What is going on here?” I ask. “What happened?”*

*“We were taking this cart down the hall,” one girl explains, “and ran into Mitchell Banks. Or more like he hit the cart with his foot. Sorry about the mess. We’ll clean it up.”*

*“Okay,” I agree, “But that doesn’t look very efficient. I’ll get you something better to scoop that into, and why don’t you find a caretaker and get some paper towels?”*

*Just then Mitchell rounds the corner.*

*Turning to face him, I ask, “Shouldn’t you be helping to clean this up?”*

*His face immediately turns bright red. “This is bullshit!” he yells. His girlfriend Sarah appears from around the corner behind him.*

*“Whoa, slow down,” I say, my voice rising in frustration. “If you were part of this, I think you should be helping to clean it up.”*

*“Fuck that! It wasn’t my fucking fault!”*

*The girls scooping the paint freeze and watch us.*

*“Mitchell, that’s enough! Into my office now!” I explode, not wanting an audience for what may come next.*

*Mitchell storms into my office. Sarah follows. I shut the door, hard. Both explode into angry argument with me about whose fault the paint spill is. I am now furious also. I just want Mitchell to take responsibility and help with the clean up. But he won’t. He argues. He swears. Sarah argues. Sarah swears. I send Sarah out of my office, so that I can try to reason with Mitchell. His anger only escalates, and he continues swearing and begins to make the verbal attack personal to me, calling me a bitch, among other things.*

*Finally, I’ve had enough. I tell him to get out.*

*“This is bullshit!” he yells again.*

*“Mitchell, this is over. You need to leave school now and you’re suspended for tomorrow as well!”*

*“Fuck you,” he answers.*

*“Make it a two day suspension,” is my response, and he storms out, grabbing Sarah on the way.*

### Background

Outside of the angry altercation I experienced with Mitchell on that day, we had spoken many other times. Mitchell had been sent to my office a number of times for discipline for swearing in class. Sarah, his constant companion, had a history of

threatening and fighting other girls, and my dealings with her also regularly brought me into contact with Mitchell.

In spite of these uncomfortable times of discipline, I saw my relationship with Mitchell at that time as mostly positive. He was an intelligent young man, capable of humorous and friendly debate, something we engaged in regularly. Often his girlfriend joined us. Mitchell and Sarah often stopped by my office or called me over during the lunch hour in the hallway to chat.

Although they got into frequent trouble (and sometimes for violent behavior), both students had kind hearts. One day, Mitchell and Sarah came into my office during the noon hour almost in tears. Sarah had in her arms a scruffy, ancient stray poodle they had picked up on the street. We phoned the Humane Society together, and I drove the students there to entrust them with the dog, whom we decided to call Peanut. On the way back to school, I asked if the students had eaten lunch. Neither had, so we drove through Tim Horton's, and I bought them each a sandwich and a donut.

Mitchell and Sarah both achieved A's and B's in their classes when they attended school regularly, but both tended to miss school for long periods of time and get behind in their work. It was difficult for me to contact their parents, either to explain discipline or investigate absenteeism, and I usually left messages for the students' parents on answering machines or with siblings.

### The Interview

Mitchell had agreed to participate in the study while regularly attending school. However, by the day the interview was held, he had missed school for approximately one month and had come into school to withdraw from all classes as well as to complete his

interview. He turned in his books and left school immediately after the interview. He said that he intended to complete his schooling through the Regina Public Adult Campus starting the next fall. His girlfriend Sarah was with him; she withdrew from classes at the same time as Mitchell.

In spite of withdrawing from school, both Mitchell and Sarah seemed to be in positive states of mind, and came in to chat with me before Mitchell began his interview with Courtney. I was not able to convince them to stay in school, and they gave me little insight as to their plans.

### Description

This interview was analyzed with a focus on vocabulary. Ideological differences between the participants are coded in their vocabulary. The social relationships, and particularly the power relationships at work in the text are revealed through the words the participants choose to use. Through their words, the speakers reveal, with their own personal codes, what is most important to them and how they think about the events and ideas they are discussing.

I took three “snapshots” (Gee & Crawford, 1998) of the participants’ vocabulary, each one focusing analysis on a different aspect of language: 1) *Wordiness*. When do the subjects *reword* each other, *over-word* or *repeat* their own thoughts? (These three types of wordiness are subtly different. By *rewording*, I mean the subject repeats the other’s statement but changes a key word or words. By *over-wording*, I mean that the subject repeats his or her own statement but changes a key word or words. By *repeating*, I mean that the subject makes exactly the same statement multiple times. 2) *Poetic language*.

What euphemisms, metaphors, or clichés do the subjects use? and 3) *Passive language*.

When do the subjects use passive language?

First snapshot: Wordy language.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Mitch's rewording, over-wording and repeating (in chronological order)</b>
Thoughts when reading my description	<b>Repeats</b> "I was very angry." "kind of"
What the girls said	<b>Over-words</b> "It was all my fault, I did everything, ...blaming it all on me"
Confronting the girls	<b>Over-words</b> "I went and confronted the girls, well Sarah confronted her, started yelling at her for getting me suspended."
Conflict with the girls	<b>Repeats</b> "It was all my fault...it was all my fault when really it wasn't."
Cause of the conflict with me	<b>Repeats</b> "everyone was against me"
Emotions at the time of the conflict with me	<b>Over-words</b> "Just because I have a past of, how should I say it, I don't know what the word is, previous, getting in trouble beforehand with Mrs. Miller for stupid things"
Why the girls were angry with him	<b>Repeats</b> "I honestly don't know. They just wanted to have something to be angry at me I guess, just trying to get me in trouble and not them. I don't know..."
Positives about school	<b>Over-words</b> "Just the friends I've made. I've made some good friends. Going out. Partying."
Courtney asks if I treat him fairly	<b>Rewords</b> "Yeah she's gonna treat you nice."
Suspension	<b>Over-words</b> "she had to suspend me kind of thing...you kind of have to...she had no choice because it's one of the rules that they have"
M asks if he hangs out with other "kids"	<b>Rewords</b> to "people"
How I could have avoided the conflict	<b>Repeats</b> "getting my story first...get my side of the story. What actually happened. Not just getting the first side." "get both sides of the story...find out from all people involved what actually happened."
Reason for quitting school	<b>Over-words</b> "I'm kind of waiting for this job. Getting prepared for it."
Life at home	<b>Over-words</b> "There's a lot of time where we're struggling. It's just hard. School is just another thing right? Something to worry about."
M: You live with mom?	<b>Rewords</b> "Yeah I live with <b>my</b> mom."

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Courtney's rewording, over-wording and repetition</b>
My description	<b>Over-words</b> "how would you alter that?...add to it?"
Accuracy of my story	<b>Rewords</b> Mitch's "Yeah mostly" to "Yeah?" and he repeats, "Yeah."
What didn't seem right about my story	<b>Over-words</b> "Was it just the fact that she didn't know the whole story?"
How Mitch feels about school	<b>Over-words</b> "How did you feel about school, how do you feel about school...how did you feel about school?"
Mitch's life outside of school	<b>Over-words</b> "What's your life like?...What's your life like? What are you doing, how do you spend your time when you're not at school?"

**Rewording** refers to the speaker repeating something someone else has said, but changing a key word or phrase. When we reword someone else's language, we are systematically placing ourselves in opposition to their way of thinking, and we are redefining the thought according to our own beliefs (Fairclough, 1989).

When Mitchell rewords Courtney, he appears on the surface to be agreeing with her. The interview moves smoothly along. But the key words that he changes each time reveal an important difference in how he thinks about school authorities (as represented by Courtney and me) in contrast to the way we think about ourselves. He disagrees without taking the risk of openly disagreeing.

For example, when Courtney asks if I treat him fairly when he is in my office to be disciplined (something that had happened a number of times) he answers, "Yeah, **she's gonna treat you nice.**" Notice that this is substantially different from saying, "Yes, Mrs. Miller always treats me fairly." By removing the personal pronoun "I," he distances himself from his statement. I, Mrs. Miller, remain the agent. And by rewording "fair" to "nice," Mitchell disagrees but sounds positive, without really saying anything at all.

Mitchell rewords Courtney twice more, both times when she is describing his relationships with others. Courtney asks, "Do you hang around with other kids at all?" In

his response, Mitch rewords “kids” to “people” and “friends,” then uses the word “kids” to refer to the younger students in the school. (While Mitchell himself refers to students in the school as “kids” throughout the interview, he seems to see himself as outside of this category. As he is 18 years old, this is perhaps not surprising.) And later Courtney asks Mitchell if he lives with “mom” (omitting the possessive “your”) and he answers, “Yeah. I live with *my* mom.”

These differences in vocabulary may represent a meaningful ideological gap between Courtney and Mitchell. Courtney’s questions reveal a number of assumptions. First, her perhaps condescending vocabulary choices of “kids” and “mom” rather than “your mom” (I suggest that one would not ask an adult, “How’s mom?” unless she were your mom also, but one would ask that question of a child) reinforce her power and authority over Mitchell, a student and by a logical extension of this assumption, a child. Through her word choice, Courtney also attempts to establish an intimacy with Mitchell. This indicates that she sees the world through his eyes, and is almost a family member. By rewording, Mitchell rejects her assumption and the intimacy, and attempts to redefine himself as other than “kid”.

Courtney rewords Mitchell only once, but significantly I think. The rewording occurs near the beginning of the interview, when Courtney is trying to elicit his opinion of the accuracy of my description of the conflict with him. She asks if the written description is accurate. Mitchell replies, “Yeah mostly.” Courtney then asks, “Yeah?” and Mitchell agrees, “Yeah.”

I wonder if this is Courtney subtly coaching Mitchell toward a “correct” answer. As someone who thinks I am going to be fair and accurate (which she makes clear in our

interview), she limits his response to the “Yeah” and rejects the “mostly.” Had she asked, “Mostly?” she would have prompted him instead to elaborate on any differences. Instead she guides Mitchell to shut that door. As the more powerful participant in the interview, she can impose her interpretation on Mitchell (Fairclough, 1989).

**Over-wording** is using an unusually high number of words to say something, or using a string of words which are near synonyms. Over-wording shows a “preoccupation with some aspect of reality—which may indicate that it is a focus of ideological struggle.” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 116)

One area in which Mitchell reveals this kind of ideological struggle is in his conflict with the girls who spilled the paint. First, he overwords his description of what the girls said with near synonyms: “It was all my fault, I did everything, [they were] blaming it all on me.” He also has trouble wording his worry while talking with me. “Just because I have a past of, how should I say it, I don’t know what the word is, previous, getting in trouble beforehand with Mrs. Miller for stupid things.” He also overwords his response to the girls after I suspended him: “I went and confronted the girls, well Sarah confronted her, started yelling at her for getting me suspended.”

An important theme of blame emerges from analysis of this ideological struggle. The altercation with me was initiated by Mitchell’s worry about being blamed for the incident. He has a history of being blamed and getting into trouble for “stupid things”. In turn, he must find someone else to blame when he confronts the girls “for getting [him] suspended.” This theme of blame will be further explored in the interpretation section of this chapter.

The second example of Mitchell's overwording comes through discussion of his suspension, or rather, my reasons for suspending him from school. Courtney asks Mitchell if he was more angry at the girls than at me. Mitchell's answer is both overworded and reworded. "Yeah, and it was kind of, she had to suspend me kind of thing because I was in the hall swearing. I've been suspended before for swearing. You kind of have to, well, that's what she said anyway. She had no choice because it's one of the rules that they have. Swearing at teachers is gonna mean a suspension."

Again, the ideological struggle revealed here is one of blame, or perhaps blamelessness. In this view, neither I nor Mitchell, is responsible for the suspension. The rules themselves are to blame. Although, Mitchell's rewording of "You kind of have to" to "well, that's what she said anyway" implies that he thinks I might be more to blame than he is saying, but that he is not willing to say this outright. Still, his view of a life in which one has no agency or will is applied even to me, the authority figure: "She had no choice."

A final example of Mitchell's overwording comes when he is asked to describe his life at home. He describes life as "Pretty hard sometimes. It's not a walk in the park. There's a lot of time where we're struggling. It's just hard. School is just another thing right? Something to worry about. And I have to worry about my job." This wordiness reveals his internal struggle to deal with the difficulties in his life, and his effort to rationalize quitting school: "School is just another thing right?...And I have to worry about my job."

Courtney's overwording also reveals an internal struggle. She has **difficulty assuming the kind of intimacy that is required to ask about Mitchell's life and**

**feelings.** When Courtney asks a question that delves into Mitchell's emotions or personal life, she has difficulty wording the question. Her discomfort surprises me, given her role as a guidance counselor, one who is supposed to be comfortable discussing difficult and intimate details of personal life with students. Yet even when asking about Mitchell's feelings about school, she overwords by asking three times, "How did you feel about school, how do you feel about school, before, before this happened, how did you feel about school?" The difficulty in wording the tense might also reveal her struggle to accept his disappointing withdrawal from school. Should she be asking how he felt then or how he feels now?

Again, when asking about life outside of school, Courtney stumbles, "Um, so what's your life like, you spend a considerable amount of time or have spent a considerable amount of time not at school, so when you're not at school, um, what's your life like? What are you doing, um, how do you spend your time when you're not at school?" And again later, "Um, and what's your whole life like, if you don't mind me jumping there." It is difficult for Courtney to bring Mitchell's personal life into the conversation, and she literally asks his permission before doing so.

If, when we are wordy, we are saying, "I'm struggling to understand this myself," then when we repeat an idea, we are saying, "I am sure of this. I really want you to hear and understand this." Speakers use **repetition** for emphasis. Just as in poetry or literature, themes are revealed in our speech by the words and ideas we repeat.

What is it that Mitchell is very sure of, and wants us to hear and understand? He repeats a number of ideas throughout the interview. During the first exchange of the interview, Courtney asks Mitchell what he was thinking and feeling as he read the

description. In his answer, he repeats the phrase, **“I was very angry.”** While being questioned about the incident itself, Mitchell repeats the phrase, **“It was all my fault”** six times over a number of responses. When Courtney asks Mitchell why the girls were angry with him, he repeats the phrase **“I honestly don’t know...I don’t know.”** And finally, when asked how I could have avoided the conflict with him, Mitchell seems very sure. He repeats and rewords four times, **“getting my story first...get my side of the story. What actually happened. Not just getting the first side.”** Throughout the interview, Mitch repeats the phrases, **“I don’t know”** and **“I guess”** as fillers.

Courtney, on the other hand, repeats only one phrase through the entire interview. It is the phrase, **“What’s your life like?”** While she may struggle to phrase the question, it seems she really wants to know. I expect that Courtney believes from her own experience and research that a student’s life outside of school, his past and experience, his supporting or destructive relationships, (more than anything else) will drive his success or failure at school. This is the question around which the real answers for educators of at-risk youth must orbit.

Second snapshot: Poetic language.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Mitch’s euphemisms and metaphors (in chronological order)</b>
The girls	“the ones who pushed my buttons”
Mitch swearing	“I was using kind of, not using very appropriate language” and “I was swearing a little” “I wasn’t really thinking about it. I had that adrenaline. It kind of slipped out.”
My interaction with him	“she was...pushing towards that it was my fault too”
Cause of the conflict with the girls	“she was putting on a big pity trip or something”...”she was...pushing it”
Felt betrayed	“Sarah was the only one that was actually standing up for me. And everyone else was going with their friends and saying it was all my fault.”
Feelings about students at	“They always take everything too far”

school	
Feelings about school	“Tired...I can’t handle it.”
Students at school	“They just get on my nerves.”
Avoiding the conflict	“Don’t jump to conclusions.”
Life at home	“It’s not a walk in the park.”

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Courtney’s euphemisms and metaphors</b>
Conflict at home	“Your mom and your sister were ganging up on you?”

As a former English teacher, I am fascinated by the poetic language that we use in every day talk. The metaphors and euphemisms that a speaker uses reveal much about how he thinks. Metaphors reveal the classification schemes that we use to organize our thoughts. Euphemisms and clichés, on the other hand, may be used to passively avoid saying something “real” or to avoid responsibility.

All Mitchell’s **metaphors** represent ideas and emotions in terms of physical movement or contact. Further, in all of these metaphors, others are active while he is passive. The girls *pushed his buttons*. I was *pushing it*. Students at school *take everything too far* and *get on his nerves*. Sarah *stood up for him*. Others may choose their behavior, but Mitchell represents himself as having little control, as an object of others’ wills. His life is firmly placed in the physical, rather than emotional, world.

Mitchell’s **euphemisms** also reveal that he sees himself as having little control, even over his own behavior or speech. When admitting that he was swearing in the hall, he downplays it, and at first uses a negative construction: “I was using **kind of, not** using very appropriate language” and then, “I was swearing **a little**” and finally, “I wasn’t really thinking about it. I had that adrenaline. **It kind of slipped out.**” Here, the adrenaline, rather than he, is responsible for what he says. Even words themselves seem to have more agency than Mitchell: “It kind of slipped out.”

Mitchell’s metaphors, euphemisms and clichés reveal that he organizes his world by seeing himself as a victim, at the whim of outside forces (destiny), but at war against them (alone or along with Sarah). He does not make choices. He has little agency or power.

Courtney uses a metaphor only once, in the following sequence.

Courtney: You and your mom get along?

Mitchell: Yeah we get along pretty good. A lot better since my sister moved out.

Courtney: How long ago did your sister move out?

Mitchell: [answer unintelligible]

Courtney: Before that your mom and your sister were **ganging up on you** or...?

Mitchell: It was more my mom and sister fighting and me getting in between it.

And then we’d start fighting. My mom and sister fought a lot, and I’d take my mom’s side and she would start fighting.

Courtney here makes the assumption that Mitchell’s mom and sister were “ganging up” on him, because his relationship with his mom is better since his sister moved out. The metaphor reveals that Courtney has accepted Mitchell’s view of himself as a victim, and that life for him is a battle zone or place of warfare.

Third snapshot: Passive language.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Mitch’s use of passive language</b>
My version of the incident	“A lot of things were left out as to what really happened”
What made Mitch angry	“It was the fact that, uh, saying that I wouldn’t help to clean it up”
Result of the incident	“It ended up me getting suspended for two days”
Cause of the conflict with me	“Probably me getting angry at the girls”
Teachers	“them getting on your case for not doing a good job”
Suspension	“Swearing at teachers is gonna mean a suspension”
Fighting at home	“It was more my mom and sister fighting and me getting

	in between it.”
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<b>Topic</b>	<b>Courtney’s use of passive language</b>
None	none

Subjects use passive language to make the agency of the action unclear. Passive language can be used to conceal agency, causality and responsibility. Given Mitchell’s discourse so far, it is not surprising to find that he often uses passive language.

First, he uses passive language to avoid saying anything negative about his school administrator and authority, me. When asked about the written account of the altercation that he reads to initiate the interview, he answers, “A lot of things were left out as to what really happened,” rather than saying that *Mrs. Miller* left out a lot of things. When asked why he became angry, he says, “It was the fact that, uh, saying that I wouldn’t help to clean it up.” His wordiness (“It was the fact that”) and hesitation (“uh”) and overall avoidance of speaking my name show a real discomfort in ascribing any blame to me.

Even when Mitchell does ascribe blame or uses more active constructions, he often softens the clauses with modifiers like “probably” and uses object words “me” or “them” as subjects instead of “I” and “they.” (“Probably me getting angry at the girls.” And “them [teachers] getting on your case for not doing a good job.”)

The power relations here are clear. Mitchell does not feel comfortable saying anything negative about me in this context. He will not, in this formal setting, say something overtly negative about school authority as represented by me (his vice-principal) to another school authority (his guidance counselor). Although he has nothing to lose—he is quitting school—the conventions of school and society prevent him from speaking freely in this context.

I note with interest, however, that all of Mitchell's passive constructions have to do with conflict situations. And all but one of these refer to the conflict with me. Once the interview moves on from this topic, Mitchell no longer needs to conceal agency. This may represent his avoidance of taking responsibility for the conflict with me, as well as a hesitation to say negative things about me. It is also possible that he simply becomes more comfortable as the interview goes on. His interpretation of the context (what situation am I in?) changes as the topic changes from the conflict (a formal interview, he feels again as though he is in trouble) to life and school in general (this feels more like a conversation).

Courtney does not use passive language at all during this interview. She is not compelled to conceal agency, or to avoid discussing causality or responsibility. She is in power. The interview takes place in her domain, the guidance office. She is the authority figure, in control and asking the questions.

#### Interpretation of the Context for the Interview

A number of tensions, which I believe are generated by its context, run throughout this interview. The interview is situated in an institutional setting, the guidance office of a high school. The guidance office is a place where students tell personal stories and go for comfort and advice. The guidance office is adjacent to the administrative office, where Mitchell has often been in trouble. The interview takes place during a school day, but a day when Mitchell has come to take a difficult step, quitting school. He is being asked questions by his guidance counselor, not a teacher, but still an authority figure in the school. The questions are on my behalf, someone with the power to suspend (as I have done) or even remove him from school. One tension, therefore, that seems to exist for Mitchell is, "What kind of situation am I in?"

As he begins the interview, he is defensive, using passive constructions, avoiding agency for himself or for me, yet admitting his anger. His discourse reveals his distrust in the institution to honour his experience, and distrust in his ability (or our permission) to clearly represent his experience. This distrust may be reinforced by Courtney, when as the more powerful participant she imposes her own interpretation on the parts of his text that threaten her view. Yet, his discourse changes as the interview continues, and he begins to speak more straightforwardly when the topic moves away from school and school conflict.

For Courtney, the greatest tension seems to exist when she approaches questions of Mitchell's feelings or life outside of school. While both participants at times use a formal discourse that one might expect in a school setting (eg. Courtney: Okay, that was great. Thank you very much." Mitchell: You're welcome.), Courtney at times attempts to adopt Mitchell's casual register ("Do you hang around with other kids at all?" and "You live with mom?"), but these attempts at intimacy are rejected by Mitchell.

#### Interpretation of Key Discourses

In the following section, I will explain and give examples of the key motifs that thread throughout the interview and are revealed by Mitchell's vocabulary. By motifs, I mean themes and recurring ideas that represent the speaker's beliefs about school. These results are just a small sample of the larger data, but they give insight into the participants' actions which led to Mitchell's suspension and, I believe, his ultimate failure to finish school. These motifs are: Blame and Powerlessness.

### The discourse of blame.

Throughout the discussion of the conflict with me, Mitchell uses language which centres around blame. The angry altercation is initiated by **his fear of being blamed** (“It was all my fault”, “blaming it all on me” “everyone was against me”), **he avoids blame** (“saying it was all my fault when really it wasn’t”), and **he attempts to blame others** (“I went and confronted the girls, well Sarah confronted her, started yelling at her for getting me suspended”). He does not trust language as transparent. He is sure that school discourse events will be used to blame and trap him, and he must avoid entrapment and punishment by refusing blame or ascribing it to others.

### The discourse of powerlessness.

For Mitchell, school seems a place where he is powerless. His language reveals his sense of powerlessness. He is at the whim of powerful outside forces. He is destined for school failure (“I can’t handle it”) as he does not connect his persona to the institution of school (“It’s just not for me I guess”). He has no power even to control his own language (“It just kind of slipped out”). There is nothing even school authorities or teachers could do to make things better (“I don’t really think there is much that could be done”). Even his often repeated markers (“I don’t know” and “I guess”) represent his belief that one cannot know or understand, let alone control, one’s own experience.

However, Mitchell sees the work world of labour as a place where one might have some control (“You can get certified...you can run your own crew”).

### The discourse of multiple meanings.

There are deep differences in how Courtney sees and uses language in this setting. Her language is active rather than passive. She controls the topic and, at times, the

interpretation of events (“Was it just the fact that she didn’t know the whole story?”) Where Mitchell sees reality as expressed by language as fatalistic and one-dimensional (“what really happened”) Courtney represents language as revealing multiple versions or truths (“Ms. Miller’s version,” “how would you alter that?”) and as something which can be controlled.

### Explanation

Power relationships are enacted in discourses, and discourses in turn reflect power relationships. Each exchange has the ability to reinforce or challenge the social order. There are two discourse events here to be explained. First, there is the discourse event of the angry altercation. Second, there is the discourse event of the interview. In both cases, the discourses used by the participants both reveal and reinforce the social orders of school, gender, and middle class authority.

The work of Ruby Payne came to mind as I was thinking about my altercation with Mitchell. I became aware of her work when it was shared with me by a colleague at an administrators’ meeting, around the time I began my research. This work was a starting point for me to begin to think of systems of power and privilege, and to begin to develop an awareness that discourse differs with socioeconomic class.

Payne (1996) notes a number of characteristics of generational poverty. She contends that students from generational poverty tend to settle issues with verbal or physical assaults, and to say exactly what is on their minds when they are angry. In generational poverty, the role of a man is to be a fighter, and a lover. The role of a woman is to be a rescuer and a caretaker. Students from generational poverty see organizations as dishonest and actively distrust those representing the organizations.

Clearly, these are over-generalized statements, and can lead to dangerous stereotypes (such as the idea that students from poverty are violent). A closer look tells me that this altercation was as much about gender as it was about socioeconomic class. Mitchell was, at the time of the original altercation, an 18-year-old young man, living with a single mother and older sister in poverty. He was the male authority figure in his family. Going back to the red paint incident, Mitchell is confronted by me, a female authority figure. The audience of his girlfriend and two other girls require him to be read as masculine. His angry script, a discourse of argument (learned at home and becoming part of Mitchell's primary discourse with "my mom and sister fighting and me getting in between it") immediately rises to the surface and intrudes into the institutional context of school. He cannot back down, and swearing is a sure way to maintain his masculine identity. As I look back, I see my own gendered middle class assumption that swearing equals verbal assault and threat of violent attack. This assumption was not correct.

An underlying conflict of assumptions and values became an overt struggle rising to a crisis. The crisis was a clash of discourses. It was further intensified by the audience of the girls, the proximity of the school administrative office, and the presence of his girlfriend as rescuer. Both Mitchell and I were driven through the tunnels of past class and gender experience into a head-on verbal collision.

Later in the interview Mitchell revealed how disconnected he felt from school. Courtney may have unwittingly reinforced his distrust in school by imposing her view of the institution as fair over Mitchell's implication that it isn't.

Both Courtney and I assumed that our responses to Mitchell had been fair and well-meaning. We did mean well. That was not enough to keep Mitchell in high school.

This one altercation can be seen as a symbol of the reasons Mitchell could not remain in high school and be true to himself. While he did his best to be respectful of the institution of school, to be responsible to his duties to his family, as well as to maintain his identity as a strong young man within his context, it became too difficult to negotiate these contradictory discourses. It was easier to walk away.

## Chapter Five — Graham Wolf

*"I'm not like that."*

### The Pencil Incident

*I am paged to come to the office. Walking from a classroom into the hall, I hear yelling. As I come around the corner, I see Graham Wolf yelling and swearing at two teachers. He is furious. Just 15 minutes ago, I was talking calmly with him about how to make some changes in his English assignment to help him to pass. He has always been respectful and polite. Now he rams through the front doors in a rage. The two teachers are standing in the front foyer watching him go, and quickly tell me that there has been a fight in class between Graham and Chad. Chad is being kept in the guidance office. Graham has refused to come to the office.*

*I step out into the bright fall sunlight. Graham is tall and muscular, with brown hair, skin, and eyes. He is still yelling and swearing, "He fucking called me poor! I'm gonna kill him!" He face is contorted, out of control with anger. He lunges at the ground, punching the earth.*

*I think of the research that I have begun to do in critical education and some recent experiences where these type of rages have escalated into even more extreme violent scenes. I am determined to calm him down.*

*"Whoa, let's talk Graham, let's go for a walk and talk this out," I say.*

*"Fuck you," he yells. "Fuck this!" and runs from the school front lawn out into the street. He peels off his shirt, throws it into the middle of the street and runs off. Leaves swirl around me as I pick up and fold the shirt, baffled by his actions.*

*I walk back into the school, enter the office and interview Chad.*

*Chad quite calmly tells me his side of what has happened. He has pale skin with an uncontrollable cloud of reddish-blond hair. He has been in trouble for bullying behavior in the past.*

*A few minutes earlier, Graham took Chad's pencil in art class. Chad told him to give his pencil back and then took Graham's Pepsi. Chad said that Graham was obviously too poor to have his own pencil. Graham pushed Chad. Chad punched Graham. The two began to fight, punching each other and yelling. The teacher broke up the fight, and asked the students to come to the office. Chad went to the office, but Graham refused and began yelling at the teacher. Another teacher heard the commotion and came to help out. That's when I was paged.*

*I contact Chad's parents and send him home. I decide to try to find Graham. I find his friend Chase, give him the shirt, and try the cell phone number that Chase tells me. No answer. Around thirty minutes later I walk out in front of the school and there Graham is, still spitting mad. He tells me he's going to beat Chad up after school. I tell him he has to leave school property. "Give me my shirt!" he yells.*

*"Chase has it," I respond, as calmly as I can.*

*"This is fucking bullshit! I'm going to kick his ass."*

*"Graham, you have to stop making threats, or leave school property."*

*"I'm fucking going to get him!"*

*"Well, then you're suspended and you need to leave school property right now."*

*His continues yelling, and crosses the street as I walk back into the school.*

*“This won’t help a thing,” I think. I turn around, walk across the street and tell Graham I’ve changed my mind. What I really want is for him to come back inside the school and work this out. He asks if he can have a smoke first.*

*Half an hour later, Graham shows up in my office. Graham and I talk about his life. We talk for an hour. He talks about racism, his job, his parents, his life, school. As he talks, large tears roll down his face. He is tired of it all. He can’t promise not to hurt Chad. If Chad starts to “talk shit” about Graham, Graham will fight him. I send Graham home to think it over and come see me in the morning.*

*In the morning, there’s no change. He is still visibly angry. He promises to fight Chad if Chad looks at him or talks to him. I tell him, in that case, that he cannot be in school. I send him home and call his mom to tell her what has happened.*

*“Now I won’t get to go out this weekend,” he says as he leaves.*

*The next week I hear about the fight that has happened between Graham and Chad over the weekend. Neither boy speaks about it again.*

At the time of this fight, Graham was a full time student. I did not know him very well. I knew him as a generally respectful grade twelve student who seemed to be trying his best in school. He struggled with some classes, especially English Language Arts. Just before this fight occurred, I had met with Graham to try to make arrangements to create a modified English class for Graham as an independent study, to try to help him to get through high school.

I did know something of Graham’s personal life. I had spoken many times to his ex-girlfriend Samantha. Samantha had become pregnant by Graham, and had given the baby up for adoption. Graham had never seen the baby, but had been into my office a few

times to use my phone. He was trying to set up a bank account to save money to give to his son in the future.

Graham was a talented break dancer. Every day during the noon hour, he and his friends, a group of about four students, congregated in the front foyer of the school to break dance. I was impressed by their skill. Soon after this incident happened, Graham, Chase and I began to speak about creating a school break dancing team. Within a month, we had done so. As a result, I came to know Graham and Chase very well. The break dance and hip hop team, “The Flystyles” was born.

By this time, I was deeply into reading about critical education. The Flystyles became my take on empowering marginalized students at MJC. It offered them legitimacy within the school, recognition, praise, and leadership opportunity. It offered them my advocacy with their teachers. It allowed me to get to know the students and their families in a deeply personal way.

We practiced Tuesdays and Thursdays at noon. Graham and Chase taught other students what they knew about break dancing. A girl, Joy, immediately stepped into a leadership position to coach other girls in hip hop dance.

We began to perform at elementary schools. The students incorporated speaking into their performances and encouraged younger students to stay in school. Because of the school’s eligibility requirements, team members were not allowed to perform outside of the school unless they had good attendance and were passing most of their classes. Team members, especially Chase, began to tutor each other so that everyone could attend performances. Over the four months that the team performed, the students’ marks rose by an average of 20%. Over the course of the performance season, none of the students—

around 20 of them—were formally disciplined by the school, most of whom had regularly been suspended before for fighting, threatening, and drug and alcohol use during the school day.

Graham, Chase and Joy have now “followed” me to my current high school. Joy has enrolled as a student, and Graham and Chase volunteer at least twice a week as dance coaches with other marginalized students, and this work is ongoing.

But at the time of the fight between Graham and Chad, all of this was yet to happen.

### Background

Just like Mitchell, Graham had agreed to participate in the interview and my study while attending full time classes at MJC. However, by the time the interview happened, a few months later, Graham had dropped nearly all of his classes and was only taking a machining class. He planned to attend the Regina Public Adult Campus the next semester (to begin one month after the interview time) to finish high school under the Adult 12 program. At this writing, he is no longer registered there and but is planning to return in the fall to complete his graduation requirements.

### The Interview

Graham seemed in a positive state of mind the day of the interview. The interview took place in the guidance office of MJC, which is adjacent to the main office. The interview took place approximately three months after the fight, the angry altercation with me, and my follow up conversation with Graham in my office the next day. By the time of the interview, my relationship with Graham had become deeper and more positive

than at the time of the angry altercation, as a result of our mutual involvement in the break dancing team.

### Description

I analyzed this interview, like Mitchell's, with a focus on vocabulary. This interview immediately frustrated me, because I had expected Graham to "say a lot" (as he had done in my office), and I felt upon listening to the interview and reading the transcript, that he had said very little. My initial impression of the data was one of silence on Graham's part. However, further analysis (such as actually timing the silences) showed me that Graham was no more silent than Mitchell. In fact, his speech acts often overlapped Courtney's.

Why then, this impression of silence?

His use of especially negative and ambiguous language make him "hard to pin down." But by saying little directly, he speaks clearly about his own sense of powerlessness.

Reviewing the work of Bronwyn Davies (2000) gave me insight. In particular, I note the following idea about positioning:

One speaker [Courtney, in this case] can position others by adopting a storyline that incorporates a particular interpretation of cultural stereotypes to which the others [Graham] are 'invited' to conform, indeed are required to conform, if they are to continue to converse with the first speaker in such a way as to contribute to the storyline that person has opened up. Of course, they may not wish to do so for all sorts of reasons. **Sometimes they may not contribute because they do not understand what the storyline is meant to be, or they may pursue their own storyline, quite blind to the storyline implicit in the first speaker's utterance, or as an attempt to resist. Or they may conform because they do not define themselves as having choice but feel angry or repressed or affronted or some combination of these**" (Davies, 2000, p. 93).

My analysis of this interview then, will focus in part on Courtney's unconscious attempts to position Graham, his use of ambiguous language to avoid her suggested storyline, and her attempts to confine him to this storyline.

Once again I took three "snapshots" of the participants' vocabulary, this time to examine the positioning of the subjects. 1) *Negative language*. When do the subjects use negation? 2) *Constrained language*. When do the subjects use constraining or limiting vocabulary such as "always" or "never"? 3) *Ambiguous language/enforcing explicitness*. How is the power interplay between ambiguous language and enforcing explicitness revealed between the participants?

First snapshot: Negative language.

Topic	Graham's use of negative language
The incident	<b>I don't like</b> talking about it.
Argument with me	When I get angry <b>I don't know</b> what I say, and <b>I don't</b> know how to control myself after that.
Cause of the argument with C	<b>I don't like</b> being called poor or any racist name.
Suspension	<b>I don't know</b> how to, <b>I didn't know</b> how to control myself.
Feelings about school	<b>I really don't mind</b> school, it's just, <b>I don't know</b> , school, and you have to come to get your education.
Is school friendly	It's not very fun and you're not having a good day and <b>you don't really want</b> to do anything.
Do people intentionally upset him?	<b>I don't think</b> intentionally upset me.
Teachers	Some of the <b>teachers just don't know</b> how to do things.
Elementary school	I never got in trouble. I always loved school. <b>I never</b> got in lots of trouble in elementary school.
Might anything give a positive school experience	<b>I don't think</b> so. I really <b>don't know</b> at this point.
What would make school perfect	<b>I really don't got</b> enough classes to tell... <b>I really don't know</b> what could make the school better for myself.
School frustrations	<b>I don't know</b> how to, like write, write an essay or, the instructions are verbal and <b>I don't know</b> how to... <b>I don't understand</b> it right

	away and I have to ask people for help.
What would prevent angry incidents	<b>I don't think</b> so. <b>I don't really think</b> there could be anything that could really help...there's pretty much nothing that could help or anything.
People's assumptions about Natives	Because I'm Native people think I'm poor or <b>I don't have</b> lots of nice things, and that <b>I can't do anything...I'm not like that</b> . It just makes me mad and when people say that, and <b>I can't control</b> what I'm going to do to them. <b>It's not really my fault</b> because they push me that far.
Life at home (G's brother)	<b>I don't think</b> he likes living at home anymore. And my mom she got tired of it, so she, <b>she doesn't really care</b> what my brother does. And my step-dad, <b>he doesn't really care</b> either.
Parents	<b>I don't listen</b> to them and I go on my own and figure things out myself.
Parents	<b>They just don't care</b> what we do.
Does G enjoy work?	<b>No, not at all.</b>
Did the altercation change G's opinion?	<b>No, I don't think</b> it really did. <b>No, I don't think</b> it really did.
Anything to add?	<b>No, I don't really think</b> there is.
Where G sees himself in future	Hopefully <b>not</b> living in Regina. <b>I don't want</b> to live here.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Courtney's use of negative language</b>
Graham always in trouble	<b>I know you're not</b> always in the office. What's always?
Conflict between G and me	<b>It wasn't</b> that you had anything against Mrs. Miller at that point. It was that she was trying to talk to you and reason with you and you were really upset?

**Negation** is the phrasing of assertions in a negative way. Negation may be a means of questioning or "taking issue with the corresponding positive assertions" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 154). But, unless those assertions have been explicitly surfaced, the text producer must assume that those positive assertions are connected with, or implicit in the discourse in which he or she is engaging.

Graham often uses negation, much more than Courtney. One area in which Graham seems to question the implicit assertions of the discourse of schooling is in the area of control. Some examples of negation relating to control are:

“When I get angry **I don’t know** what I say, and **I don’t know** how to control myself after that.”

“**I don’t know** how to, **I didn’t know** how to control myself.”

“**I can’t control** what I’m going to do to them. **It’s not really my fault** because they push me that far.”

These negations contradict the corresponding positive assertions: *You can control what you say. You can control what you do. Your actions and their consequences are within your power.* Indeed, when teachers and school administrators discipline students, we employ a behavior/consequence discourse that holds these assumptions. Graham’s negations come across almost as a discursive cry for help, a setting the record straight.

A second pattern within these negations is the repetition of “I don’t” for Graham. Examples follow:

“**I don’t like** talking about [racism].... **I don’t like** being called poor or any racist name.... **I don’t know** how to, like write, write an essay or, the instructions are verbal and **I don’t know** how to...**I don’t understand** it right away and I have to ask people for help.... **I don’t listen** to [my parents] and I go on my own and figure things out myself. **I don’t want** to live here.”

The implication of this pattern of negation is an otherness, or a sense of isolation, that Graham feels within the discourse of schooling. The corresponding positive assertion to “I don’t” is “you do.” *You do like talking about racism [because you haven’t*

*experienced it]. You do make me feel poor. You do know how to write an essay or understand verbal instructions. You do think parents will help me find my way. I don't... I don't.*

In one particularly heart breaking speech act, Graham explicitly surfaces and challenges assumptions he has experienced within school discourse.

*Well, um, it's everywhere I guess. It's whatever race you are and it's your own opinion how you feel about it, and like, because I'm Native people think I'm poor or I don't have lots of nice things, and that I can't do anything, like, I know that I have lots of things and I can do whatever I want, and, but a lot of people don't see that side of me, and they think all I want to do is, like drink Lysol or do whatever and get in trouble and steal, but, I'm not like that. It just makes me mad and when people say that, and I can't control what I'm going to do to them. It's not really my fault because they push me that far.*

Courtney uses negation twice, once in a formulation and the second time to openly question Graham's assertion. First, in the following exchange:

*Courtney: Okay. Um, what about the conflict between you and Mrs. Miller?*

*Graham: What conflict?*

*Courtney: Well, at one point, uh*

*Graham: Oh, um...*

*Courtney: You kinda walked off and said some rude things to her. Did you?*

*Graham: Uh, I was just really angry and when I get angry I don't know what I say, and I don't know how to control myself after that.*

*Courtney: Okay, so Mrs. Miller, just was, **it wasn't that you had anything against Mrs. Miller at that point**, it was that she was trying to talk to you and reason with you and you were really upset?*

*Graham: Yeah.*

Here Courtney uses negation, possibly to lead Graham into the “correct” response for this discourse. Her negation cuts off the corresponding positive assertion “I was angry at Mrs. Miller.” (This use of negation can also be seen as checking understanding, agreeing upon a characterization of the events.)

Courtney’s second use of negation follows:

*Graham: Um, in elementary school, I never got in trouble. I always loved school. I never got in lots of trouble in elementary. Like, occasionally, like maybe twice a month or once a month. But in high school, I always get in trouble now I guess.*

*Courtney: I know you’re not always in the office. What’s always?*

*Graham: Um, most of the time I get into trouble over little things, like yelling and screaming.*

Here Courtney challenges one of Graham’s explicit, rather than implicit, assumptions. She questions his perceptual framework around “I always get in trouble now.” This questioning of Graham’s idea of “always” leads me to the second snapshot.

Second snapshot: Constrained language.

Topic	Graham’s use of constrained or limiting language
The altercation	It’s <b>all</b> about racists and that’s usually what <b>everyone</b> thinks about... <b>all</b> they know is the negative, the negative uh, characteristics about their race or whatever.
Racist conflict	That’s how it’s <b>always</b> been with me and that <b>all everyone</b> knows how to make <b>anyone</b> feel bad.
People upsetting G	... <b>everyone</b> knows I’m like, an outgoing person.
School trouble	But in high school, I <b>always</b> get in trouble now I guess.
Frustrations in school	<b>I have to</b> ask people for help.
School comfort	<b>Everyone</b> knows each other, and they’re not afraid to ask <b>anyone</b> for help.
Prevention of conflict	I don’t really think there could be <b>anything</b> that could really help because that happens in <b>every</b> school, it’s <b>always</b> going to be in every school, because it’s bullying and racism, and sometimes you

	just don't like a student or, it just happens and there's pretty much <b>nothing</b> that could help or <b>anything</b> .
Racism	Well, um, it's <b>everywhere</b> I guess. It's <b>whatever</b> race you are...because I'm Native people think I'm poor or I don't have lots of nice things, and that I can't do <b>anything</b> , like, I know that I have lots of things and can do <b>whatever</b> I want...
Parents not caring about his brother	I <b>do</b> care because like, that's pretty much like the <b>only</b> brother I've had.
Doing things alone	That's the <b>only</b> way. Like, that how I've <b>always</b> been.
Avoiding conflicts	There's really <b>nothing</b> that anyone can do or help in <b>any way</b> , because it's really going to happen one way or another, I guess. To <b>anyone</b> .
Regina	There's really <b>nothing</b> here for me and yeah <b>nothing</b> here, and I've <b>always</b> wanted to move away. And yeah, there's <b>nothing</b> here.
His childhood	I would really like my son or daughter to grow up how I was, and you know, how school is, and how people treat each other, because that the <b>only</b> way to get stronger.

I believe that Courtney's questioning of Graham over his use of the word "always" reveals an overt struggle between discourse types. Graham's discourse type takes as commonsensical that certain things "always" or "never" will be so. Negative experience and lack of control in his world are taken for granted. Courtney, however, rejects this framework. Within her discourse of schooling, the world is more fluid, with more possibilities and interpretations open.

And what does Graham hold as static, unchanging? First, his experience as an aboriginal young man in what he sees as a racist society: "**all** they know is the negative, the negative uh, characteristics about their race or whatever. That's how it's **always** been with me and that **all everyone** knows how to make **anyone** feel bad... I **always** get in trouble now I guess... I don't really think there could be **anything** that could really help because that happens in **every** school, it's **always** going to be in every school, because it's bullying and racism, and sometimes you just don't like a student or, it just happens

and there's pretty much **nothing** that could help or **anything**.... Well, um, it's **everywhere** I guess. It's **whatever** race you are... because I'm Native people think I'm poor or I don't have lots of nice things, and that I can't do **anything**.... There's really **nothing** that anyone can do or help in **any way**, because it's really going to happen one way or another, I guess. To **anyone**."

This world view of a racist, unchanging context must in turn contribute to his assumption that, "There's really **nothing** here for me and yeah **nothing** here, and I've **always** wanted to move away. And yeah, there's **nothing** here."

Yet this negative experience has not crushed all positive outlook. Graham still has dreams and plans, to be a chef, to have children, and to raise those children as he was: "I would really like my son or daughter to grow up how I was, and you know, how school is, and how people treat each other, because that the **only** way to get stronger."

Third snapshot: Ambiguous language/enforcing explicitness.

Topic	Graham's use of ambiguous language/ Courtney's use of enforcing explicitness
G's response to written account	<p>G: Um, I was thinking how, how I was feeling and how it made me feel about what, what he said to me.</p> <p>C: <b>How did it make you feel?</b></p> <p>G: Uh, it made me feel really angry. It really just made me feel angry and <b>I don't like talking about it though</b>, 'cause it's all about racists and that's usually what everyone thinks about.</p> <p>C: Um, when you say stuff what everyone thinks about, <b>can you explain that?</b></p> <p>G: Well, usually students, that's usually what they go for right off the bat, is what race you are and how you live and where you live and all they know is about the negative, the negative, uh, characteristics about their race or whatever.</p>
Feelings about school	<p>C: Um, <b>how did you feel about school</b> before this incident happened?</p> <p>G: Mmm, I really don't mind school, it's just, <b>I don't know, school, you have to come to get your education.</b></p> <p>C: How do you...<b>could you describe school for me again?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Um,</b></p>

	<p>C: <b>Like, is it a friendly place, is it</b></p> <p>G: Well it's friendly at some points and then at some other points it's not very fun and you're not having a good day and you don't want to really do anything. <b>That's pretty much it. How it is.</b></p>
Bad days	<p>C: Okay, <b>what makes you have a bad day? Do you ever have bad days?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Yeah, I do.</b></p> <p>C: Yeah? (laughter) <b>What creates them or what?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Family problems, work problems, girlfriend problems, or you just woke up on the wrong side of the bed.</b></p> <p>C: Yeah, sometimes we just have a bad day right?</p> <p>G: <b>Mhmm.</b></p> <p>C: Okay, <b>would you like to expand on any of those, like work problems, what...</b></p> <p>G: Um, work problems, you go to work and the managers or people that you work with start yelling at you for no reason, or you're not doing your work right and you forget to do something and that makes you stressed out, and you bring it to school <b>and that's pretty much it.</b></p> <p>C: Okay. Um, <b>how about girlfriend problems?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Mmm, just girlfriend problems</b> (laughter).</p> <p>C: <b>Sort of fights or...</b></p> <p>G: Yeah, fights and freaking out on each other and just, like, lots of stress about everything and what you're going to do with your life, and who you want to be with. <b>Pretty much, that's about it.</b></p>
Teachers unfair	<p>C: Anything else that teachers do that bothers you?</p> <p>G: Um, maybe just like, some teachers are sexist toward students, and they only pick some of the students, not like all the students.</p> <p>C: Okay, <b>when you say sexist do you mean they favour boys over girls or girls over boys?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Yeah.</b></p> <p>C: <b>Which?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Depends on the teachers and it depends who's in the class too.</b></p> <p>C: Okay, do you think, <b>do you ever perceive, uh, teachers as being racist?</b></p> <p>G: Um, I haven't seen any, but <b>I don't know, maybe they are, I really don't know.</b></p>
Positive school experience	<p>C: Okay, um, <b>is there anything that could change at school, that might give you a more positive school experience?</b></p> <p>G: Positive school experience? Mmm, <b>no I don't think so.</b> I really don't know at this point. Positive school experience.</p> <p>C: <b>Anything we could change to make it better for you?</b></p> <p>G: <b>Um...</b></p> <p>C: <b>Say you woke up tomorrow and school was a place, an absolutely perfect place that you wanted to come to every day, what would it look like?</b></p>

	G: <b>I really don't know</b> 'cause I don't got enough classes to really tell.
School experience	C: Do you, <b>do you think that looking back on your whole education experience that it's been mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in the middle?</b> G: Um, it's somewhere in the middle. <b>Yeah I think it's somewhere in the middle.</b>
Effect of the conflict	C: Did [the conflict] change your opinion on anything or anybody? G: Um, no I don't think it really did. No I don't think it really did.

How is the power interplay between ambiguous language and enforcing explicitness revealed between the participants? Within this context, Courtney's discourse is dominant, the accepted discourse of schooling. This discourse holds that students have choice, possibilities and control. Graham's discourse asserts (often in a negative way) that he does not have choice, or control, or many possibilities, especially if he stays in the context of school and our city.

This asymmetry of discourses plays out in this interview through a dynamic of Graham's use of ambiguous language and Courtney's use of language which attempts to enforce explicitness. It is Graham's use of ambiguous language that led me to feel that he said very little in his interview when I first listened to it. Throughout the interview, Graham dodges questions. He is reluctant to give a straight response. This creates a tension throughout the interview. Note the following example:

*M: Um, how did you feel about school before this incident happened?*

*G: Mmm, I really don't mind school, it's just, I don't know, school, you have to come to get your education.*

*M: How do you...could you describe school for me again?*

*G: Um,*

*M: Like, is it a friendly place, is it...*

*G: Well it's friendly at some points and then at some other points it's not very fun and you're not having a good day and you don't want to really do anything. That's pretty much it. How it is.*

Fairclough describes this dynamic in this way:

Ambiguity or ambivalence can be a useful device in the hands of less powerful participants for dealing with those in power; but those in power may respond by *enforcing explicitness*...silence is another weapon for the less powerful participants, particularly as a way of being noncommittal about what more powerful participants say; but the latter may again be able to force participants out of silence...by asking *do you understand? Or do you agree? Or what do you think?* (Fairclough, 1989, p. 136).

Graham indeed works very hard to say nothing meaningful (eg. *I don't know, school, you have to come to get your education*). Courtney (the dutiful interviewer, and the person who represents power within this situation) tries to get more detail out of him by asking follow up questions (*How do you...could you describe school for me again?*). Graham uses silence (*Um...*), Courtney presses him and formulates a response for him (*Like, is it a friendly place, is it...*), Graham responds with further ambiguity (*Well it's friendly at some points and then at some other points it's not very fun*) and then ends with a marker such as "That's pretty much it" or "I don't really know" or "That's about it" to signal that he is finished talking about it. This pattern repeats throughout the interview, and every time Courtney asks a question about Graham's school experience.

#### Interpretation of the Context of the Interview

This interview, even more than Mitchell's, seems a struggle between very different discourses. This struggle, sometimes an overt one, leads to frustration for both participants.

What problems arise for Graham? And what discourse types does he generate to try to resolve them? Graham is an independent and private person, and has no prior close relationship with Courtney. Courtney has taught him, but he is not the kind of student to have sought a guidance counselor's help ("I go on my own and figure things out myself, because that's the only way. Like, that's how I've always been"). It is clear that he has been hurt many times in the context of school, particularly in the assumptions about his race ("because I'm Native people think I'm poor"). But in the absence of a relationship of trust, Graham is reluctant to speak openly.

As kind as she is, Courtney may even unwittingly reinforce a racial stereotype when asking Graham about his family: "Okay and have you met your sister?...and that's from a previous relationship?" She suggests here a narrative for Graham's family of multiple children from different relationships. Graham avoids this narrative, whether or not it's true, and uses ambiguity to answer a different question: "Um, I think she moved, um, we met her last year."

Perhaps because of his reluctance to adopt Courtney's suggested storyline, which is revealed when she formulates responses ("You're completely satisfied with the way it's written." "It wasn't that you had anything against Mrs. Miller." "Is it a friendly place?"), Graham adopts a discourse of ambiguity. Especially when questioned about the conflict with Chad, Graham is uncommunicative ("Yup...Uh, no there wasn't...No...Mhmm...What conflict?"). In the course of the interview, he repeats the phrase "I don't know" fourteen times.

As with Mitchell's interview, Courtney adopts a more personal discourse to try to access information from Graham ("Yeah, sometimes we just have a bad day right?" "So

they're taking their chances hey?"). She even explicitly challenges his discourse a number of times: "I know you're not always in the office. What's always?" and "As in nothing here, like family, your family lives here." Her word choice near the end of the interview reveals frustration: "So we've *exhausted* our questions."

At the end of the interview, when thanked for his participation, Graham remains outside of the middle class conventions that would have him respond with "You're welcome," and just seems relieved the interview is over.

Courtney: Okay, thanks very much.

Graham: Okay.

### Interpretation of Key Discourses

#### The discourse of powerlessness.

Like Mitchell, Graham sees himself as powerless within the world of school. School is something that happens to him, a place in which he has no agency. He cannot control his own actions or words: "When I get angry I don't know what I say, and I don't know how to control myself after that."

In this lived narrative, even his own decision to be violent is outside of his control if someone says the wrong thing to him. If someone calls him poor, for example, "I can't control what I'm going to do to them. It's not really my fault because they push me that far." He assumes others have no control either. If someone provokes or threatens him, "Maybe some days people are having bad days, and I guess I'm the person that gets in the way or something."

Connected to this discourse of powerlessness is an assumption of fatalism. Like Mitchell, Graham's discourse assumes that none of this can ever change. He says, "I

don't really think there could be anything that could really help because that happens in every school, it's always going to be in every school...and there's pretty much nothing that could help or anything."

#### The discourse of anger.

Graham's world is coloured by anger, especially expressed as yelling. His actions and decisions are fueled by what makes him "really feel angry." He says "That's all everyone knows how to make anyone feel bad." Anger is connected to violence and threats of violence, and is a justification for his own violence and threats of violence.

Yet, Graham expresses frustration with this narrative. School is made worse when "people try to fight or yell around." Work is frustrating because "managers or people that you work with start yelling at you for no reason." His personal relationship with his girlfriend is also characterized by "fights and freaking out on each other." When thinking about his own yelling and anger, though, he minimizes it, saying he gets in trouble at school for "little things, like yelling and screaming."

And Graham describes my actions with him as having been fair because I "never, like freaked out or anything" and "kept cool about everything" and "let me freak out about how it is" and "wanted to talk to me after I was done freaking out, and like yeah, I really do think she handled it well."

#### Explanation

In society, and in school, "tendencies in the societal order of discourse will not be a simple matter of progression in one direction, but contradictory and difficult to sum up" (Faircough, p. 231). In analyzing this interview, I sense many more layers than I feel I can access with the resources of my own experiences. I sense a tension between Courtney

and Graham that I cannot easily define. In the original fight with Chad, it is clear that Graham lives out a familiar script of verbal threat and physical violence.

Graham seems to me to feel oppressed in nearly every area of his life: school, relationships, family, and work. He connects this oppressive experience to his identity as a Native youth. Graham's story of himself in school is one of hopelessness and powerlessness. Yet "we are all oppressed from time to time by this hopeless presentism that tells us time and again 'things will never change.' Throughout history these hopeless moments have been followed by radical changes" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 74).

If schools do not move toward a radical change in how we do business, students like Graham will continue to be inundated with the ideology of their oppressors. They will come to believe "I'm just a Native. I'm not like you and I have no business here."

I recall, for example, a number of recent meetings I have attended where my colleagues, when discussing programming, have combined or made synonymous the ideas of intellectually disabled students and First Nations students. I have argued that it is dangerous and racist to assume all First Nations students can be combined in a category with disabled students. It is from us that Graham has learned to define himself in the negative, as non-white. Davies says, "The privileged term defines the meaning of the subordinate or dependent term as other to itself...Being positioned as one who belongs in or is defined in terms of the negative or dependent term can...lock people into repeated patterns of powerlessness" (Davies, 2000, p. 107).

I think also of how often yelling and anger are in fact part of what we do in the course of student "discipline". What storyline are we activating when we yell at students

like Graham? A narrative of threat and violence, in which their only available script is to respond with threat and violence in kind.

### Changing the Story

Students like Graham are continuing to write their identities. If we have the courage to surface the lies embedded in the assumptions within our system, we have a chance to change the story for the Grahams in our schools. We must “struggle to see from the point of view of those students whom we observe to be powerless in our own and other’s classrooms where our own authority as adults and teachers makes it difficult to privilege their perceptions, which do not easily make sense from where we stand” (Davies, 2000, p. 107).

Because I have continued to have a relationship with and many conversations about education and society with Graham, I have seen much growth in both of us. Recently, Graham, Chase, Joy and I team taught a group of Physical Education teachers an introductory session on break dancing at the Saskatchewan Physical Educators Association Conference. At the session were three teachers from Wymark, Saskatchewan, my home town. These teachers gamely took on the challenge of attempting some challenging break dance moves! It was a full-circle moment for me.

For the past two years, Graham and Chase have been teaching me not only about break dancing, but also about some other elements of “hip hop” culture. (While hip hop culture comes to us from young urban African American culture, I observe that many of our young First Nations youth have identified with it and adopted it as their own.) Thus I have learned a little about rap. Rap, a style of poetic language set to a beat, is central to hip hop culture. Chase especially speaks with passion and pride about listening to, break

dancing to, writing and performing rap. He keeps a notebook in which he writes rap lyrics, and he sometimes asks me to read these lyrics. Before learning about rap from Graham and Chase, I assumed rapping was a deviant or at least resistant act. Now I see rapping as a highly political, deeply literate art form. In it I see much opportunity for school leaders to connect marginalized youth to critical literacy skills.

I would like to close this chapter with a rap written by Chase. It was written after the three of us discussed social change. This rap expresses his dream of hope and change. Like he says, "Spells can be broken, all you have to do is rehearse."

*I got a tight tight grip, so my hold won't slip.  
My grasp on life is going to pull me through.  
Even if I slipped I got 2 hands,  
so I would still be grasping.  
So forever holding on everlasting.  
No matter how much darkness the shadows are casting.  
There's always a light at the end of the tunnel waiting to be found.  
Follow your dreams, keep your head up and never stare at the ground.  
You never know what's comin to you until you see it first.  
Thas why experiences teach you the best and the worst.  
People think sometimes that life is a curse.  
But spells can be broken, all you have to do is rehearse.  
Even though love sometimes hurts,  
It's always there in the end.  
So forever loving you gotta respect family and friends.  
So get the unique style and start your own trends.  
Soon you'll have enough power to change people's minds.  
Sort of like me, the smart urban Einstein.  
You have to find solutions to situations.  
This generation, predicaments are an every day thing.  
And you could change things.*

*Make your decisions with precision.  
It's your own fault if you give in,  
Hopefully by the end of it, you're still living.  
But you learn from your mistakes  
And they are risks you must take  
In order to shake off the excess useless information,  
Causing you to progressively move forward  
Step by step, which is a positive decision.  
But you can't be positive without being a little negative.  
So go ahead, make mistakes,  
Loosen up your grip a little bit,  
But make sure you are comfortable with what you're doing,  
And be prepared for the consequences.*

## Chapter Six — Courtney and Me

“blindsided by the eruption”

### Background

I never expected to be scrambling to complete my interview with Courtney at the end of the school year, yet that is what happened. Like the interviews with the boys, our conversation together was scheduled and rescheduled around the urgent school events that continued to displace it. It eventually took place during the school day, in my small office within the school. Outside my two doors, one to the main office and one to the hallway, we continued to hear the noise of daily school operation, the bell ringing, announcements, students and teachers coming and going.

Amidst the frenetic pace of June, what I had meant to be two separate interviews actually became one long interview between Courtney and me. Where Mitchell’s and Graham’s interviews seldom deviate from their question and answer format, Courtney and I had a more flowing conversation between colleagues, often punctuated by laughter. I enjoyed this conversation, and the opportunity for reflection that it provided. Together, Courtney and I tried to build a theory of what had happened with Mitchell, with Graham, and with other marginalized students in our educational system and society.

### Description

For the sake of contrast and consistency, I begin this chapter with some samples of our vocabulary usage that align with three of the previous “snapshots” that I have used: metaphor, negation, and passive language.

#### First snapshot: Metaphor.

Topic	My use of metaphor
Conflict with	“I felt completely <b>blindsided</b> by the <b>eruption</b> that happened with

Mitchell	Mitch.” “I just didn’t know what was <b>under the surface.</b> ” “he just <b>went off</b> ”
Confrontation in the hallway	“you get caught in a paradigm of <b>win and lose</b> I guess. And you can’t lose that one in front of students.”
Angry students	“I’ll often bring a student into my office, close the door and let them yell and swear at me, and <b>come down from it</b> a little bit...we can reason it out once they’ve just kind of, <b>vented off</b> the, the anger”
Mitchell and Sarah	“They both just went <b>on the attack</b> and so at that point I have to suspend them.”
Suspension for publicly swearing at me	“There has to be, um, a <b>drawing of the boundaries.</b> ” “I have to <b>take that stand</b> which always <b>pushes the student further</b> into their anger”
Students forced to leave school	“It’s the easiest thing for sure for the school when there’s a safety concern, I think then we’re justified in removing someone from our program. But it still leaves questions of a pretty significant population of our students, probably 15 to 20 kids that we <b>off-loaded.</b> ”
Conflict with Mitch	“I did, I think, sort of <b>jump on him.</b> ”
Mitch’s acceptance of his failure in school	“He’s <b>bought that.</b> Or he’s <b>owned it.</b> ”
The dance team	“I say the dance team was the best thing I did. It was also the worst thing that I did. It had a huge <b>personal cost</b> to me and my family.” “It also put a <b>huge burden</b> on me.”
My emotional state	“I’ve got <b>nothing left.</b> ”
Conflict with Graham	“my mind was really on...what was going on <b>under the surface</b> here” “[the teacher] came in and said I’ve just had a <b>huge blow up</b> in my class”
Graham’s called poor	“that’s why <b>he blew up</b> in this case, I mean he just, he was called poor.”

Topic	Courtney’s use of metaphor
At-risk students	“school just doesn’t, <b>they don’t fit with school</b> ”
Students leaving school	“they just <b>drop off the face of the earth</b> ”
Mitch’s failure to complete school	“it’s too bad that he thought that he was the <b>screw-up</b> and couldn’t just, couldn’t just carry on.”
Sarah and Mitch’s social isolation	“I think it comes from, well, Sarah in particular having, you know, lots of <b>battles</b> with other students.”
At-risk students	“those traditionally are the kind of kid that teachers would <b>write off,</b> honestly”
Students leaving	“It’s not going to be beneficial to society or anyone else if these kids

school	just fall by the wayside.”
At-risk students	“Invisible”
Teachers dealing with at-risk students	“It’s so easy to sit in judgment.”
Racist students	“when I do like journals, they’ll be quite open about their, their, um, how they, you know, don’t like First Nations people, and blah blah blah, because they think they’re lazy, and they’re dirty, and they’re stupid, and they’re you know, they’re violent and, and, uh, <b>it’s a huge, um burden to me</b> , when I read these journal and I try to , you know, how do you change that kind of attitude?”

Metaphors reveal the comparative schemes that we use to generate our thoughts. As Davies explains, “the words the speaker uses inevitably contain images and metaphors that both assume and invoke the ways of being that the participants take themselves to be involved in” (Davies, 2000, p. 92). Looking at this data, mining my own words for how I organize my world has been revealing and challenging. What narratives am I living out?

First, with both conflicts, I characterize the students as volcanic forces of nature. They are unpredictable, uncivilized, and uncontrollable. The “eruption” comes from “under the surface” to create a huge “blow up.” It suggests the geological layers of a student’s life, and the anger hidden lava-like, barely contained beneath a crust of “school-appropriate” behavior. What role do I see for myself in these conflicts? This narrative positions me as an innocent victim to forces of nature over which I have no control. I have no responsibility and cannot be blamed.

Another consistent set of my metaphors relates to war or battle. I am “blindsided” by these conflicts, and think in terms of “win and lose” and “drawing of the boundaries.” Students go “on the attack.” I “take that stand” which “pushes the student further.” In this set of assumptions, I have more agency, but find I am overtly uncomfortable with my own thinking, as expressed when I say I have been “caught in a paradigm,” as though I

am victim to the systems of thought around me. Both the volcano metaphors and the war metaphors suggest my own fear of these events. Both metaphors also suggest that I am an innocent victim amidst violent and uncontrollable events.

A third set of metaphors that I use consists of cost/consumer imagery. Students who have been forced to leave school have been “off-loaded.” Mitch has “bought” or “owned” that he cannot be successful in school. Working with these students has come at a “huge personal cost” to me and my family, leaving me with “nothing left”.

When taken together, the first two images reflect how I and our system see marginalized students: as threatening. Indeed, their words, which led to this study, seemed threatening to me. But threatening to what? Juxtaposed with the image of consumerism and cost, I can easily see how I may on some level think of these “threatening” events with marginalized students in terms of threat to my status rather than my safety.

Courtney uses some similar metaphors. She refers to student “battles” and describes staff as “writing off” marginalized students. Where I cast myself as victim though, she characterizes the students as passive victims to a system outside of our control. In an interesting rewording, she says that “school just doesn’t, they don’t fit with school,” changing the subject, the agency, from school to the marginalized students. Continuing this theme of passivity, the students “drop off the face of the earth” or “fall by the wayside.” They become “invisible.”

In this narrative, marginalized students may vanish mysteriously (almost magically), but neither they nor school officials are to blame. She at times works hard to continue this narrative, correcting the agency as above from “school” to students.

Second snapshot: Negative language.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>My use of negation</b>
The conflict with Mitchell	<p><b>“I didn’t expect it coming at all...I wasn’t mad.”</b></p> <p><b>“I just didn’t know</b> what was under the surface.”</p> <p><b>“I still really don’t, I still really don’t understand</b> in a, in a sense um why, why this went the way it went. You know, and I still don’t know if I were to do it again, how I would handle it differently.”</p> <p><b>“You can’t lose</b> that one in front of other students.”</p>
Students swearing at me	<b>“I don’t know a way around</b> having to be pretty severe”
Mitch’s suspension	<b>“I did, I think, sort of jump on him, and not give him a chance</b> to talk about what, what his side of the story was.”
Mitch’s interview	<b>“he didn’t know,</b> you know, <b>he couldn’t identify</b> what parts of the system hampered him from being successful”
Mitch and Sarah	<b>“They didn’t seem very connected</b> to other students”
Caring about at-risk students	<b>“But how can you not?</b> You know. I just <b>don’t know how you can’t.</b> ”
Educators who don’t care	<b>“I don’t think it’s that they don’t care.</b> I think it’s that you get hardened. And it’s hard not to. I mean I’ve, because it’s painful to care.”
Graham taking off his shirt	<b>“I still don’t get that.”</b>
Fight between Graham and Chad	<b>“I don’t know.</b> Do you try to prevent the fight?... <b>I didn’t do that</b> in this case....I don’t know. <b>I don’t really understand it.”</b>
Students who drop out	<b>“that seems the pattern to me, that they just can’t work through</b> the conflict. They leave....If I don’t like you or I don’t like what you did, I’m leaving”
What frustrated me about Graham’s conflict	<b>“It seemed like a white kid picking on a First Nations kid, and then a fight that was inevitable, that I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t change</b> anyone’s mind about the world. You know? I just felt like my efforts were very futile.”

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Courtney’s use of negation</b>
Students who drop out	<p><b>“there is a group of kids that, um, school just doesn’t, they don’t fit with school”</b></p> <p><b>“They quit, they can’t come. They can’t.”</b></p> <p><b>“if students aren’t willing to put in the effort</b> towards, uh, have the discipline to complete, um, even simple activities, then, maybe it is, I mean they get, obviously part of the, part of the responsibility is with the child.”</p>
My caring about at-risk students	<b>“Do you not think</b> that has something to do, your caring about the kids who need the most caring about?”

Students dropping out	<b>“It’s not going to be beneficial to society or anyone else if these kids just fall by the wayside.”</b>
Her interview with Graham	<b>“there isn’t that level of trust that, and you gave him that opportunity when he was crying in your office.”</b>
Racist journal entries	<b>“I hadn’t written, hadn’t done them as responsive journals...I don’t think I’d ever do that again.”</b>

To repeat from Chapter Five, **negation** is the phrasing of assertions in a negative way. Negation may be a means of questioning or “taking issue with the corresponding positive assertions” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 154). Therefore, the text producer must assume that those positive assertions are connected, or implicit, with the discourse in which he or she is engaging. It may be an argument with self, an attempt to continue with a consistent narrative within which one finds inconsistencies.

When I use negation in this conversation, I indeed seem to engage in argument with self, in an attempt to sort out of the “cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography” (Davies, 2000, p. 92). I struggle with my own notion of role, power and choice in the context of discipline of marginalized students. I present again the storyline of self as victim to an unexpected event: “I didn’t expect it coming at all,” and “I wasn’t mad.” I then revert to the script of having no choice: “You can’t lose that one in front of other students” and “I don’t know a way around having to be pretty severe.” I express confusion, frustration and powerlessness: “I still really don’t, I really don’t understand,” “I still don’t get that” and “I couldn’t change anyone’s mind about the world.”

Like me, Courtney seems to be attempting to work out inconsistencies in her own experiences. She argues with the assertions implicit in the discourse of schooling that school benefits all students and that all students can come to school when she says, “they

don't fit with school," "they can't come. They can't" and "It's not going to be beneficial to society or anyone else if these kids just fall by the wayside."

Then in contrast, when I express regret that more wasn't done to help Mitchell stay in school, she says, "if students aren't willing to put in the effort towards, uh, have the discipline to complete, um, even simple activities, then, maybe it is, I mean they get, obviously part of the, part of the responsibility is with the child."

Third snapshot: Passive language.

Topic	My use of passive language
Conflict with Mitchell in the hall	"Once it becomes, kind of a public confrontation with me in the hallway, I feel, I mean <b>you can't you get caught</b> in a paradigm of win and lose I guess. And <b>you can't lose</b> that one in front of students" "I guess <b>you feel you have to be consistent.</b> " "You have to, <b>you can't allow it.</b> "
Mitchell's dropping out	"I guess <b>we did what we felt we could given what we knew but...</b> "

Topic	Courtney's use of passive language
Students swearing at me	"particularly <b>if there's bad language</b> "
Students dropping out	"It's not going to be beneficial to society or anyone else if these <b>kids just fall by the wayside.</b> "

Remembering that passive language can be used to conceal agency, causality and responsibility, and given our positions within this context it is perhaps not surprising that Courtney and I use very little passive language. However, a revealing example of my use of passive language does arise. In the entire exchange where I talk about suspending Mitchell, I avoid agency by changing the subject from "I" to "you," using second person instead of first person voice to attempt to distance myself from my own actions.

Examples follow:

“I mean you get caught in a paradigm of win and lose I guess. And you can’t lose that one in front of students”

“I guess you feel you have to be consistent.”

“You have to, you can’t allow it.”

This distancing reveals a tension with my acceptance of my own choices.

Bronwyn Davies (2000) has been useful in understanding choice as “forced choice.” Just as the students act out a script of angry threat, my positioning within the discourse of high school vice principal made my “chosen” line of action seem the only valid action, not because there was no other action, but because my placement within the discourse required me to *want* the suspension.

Courtney uses passive language, and removes agency from the students, when she says “particularly if there’s bad language” when agreeing with me that students must be suspended for public displays. Aside from the agency question here, I find the phrase “bad language” interesting as it assumes again that students have “good language” available to them. This is part of a “good school behavior” discourse which holds again that the student can choose, and that a “consistent” (to use my word) consequence must follow.

Courtney again uses passive voice when she comments that students “fall by the wayside,” as though untouched by human hands. This comment removes agency from staff, students, and even society, as though their dropping out of school is rather like an act of nature. Looked at more closely, the phrase “fall by the wayside” is actually a Biblical allusion, from the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. In the parable, as the

farmer sows his seeds, some fall along the wayside (onto the path) and cannot grow because the soil has been compacted and never loosened. Instead, the birds come and eat the seeds. Taken this way, these students' dropping out would be seen as an unfortunate but inevitable loss, part of the cost of doing business. In my experience, this is often how we view students' leaving school: unfortunate, inevitable, but part of the school's unchallengeable natural cycle.

Fourth snapshot: Word choice.

In addition to the previous snapshots, I would like to describe how we change our word choice to refer to students as our conversation progresses.

After reading Mitchell's interview, I have become especially sensitive to the use of the word "kid" to refer to any student, but especially those who are approaching adulthood. Although I have spent my career referring to students as "kids", it now seems to me to be an especially condescending word, a "bad" word of our own, a word that withholds power as it positions students as children. Therefore, while transcribing and reading the conversation between Courtney and me, I was struck by how often we use the word "kid" or "kids." And so I began to count our references.

In the first half of the interview, Courtney and I almost equally use the word "kids" 51 times and the word "students" 20 times. Then in the second half of the interview, our word choice reverses. We use the word "kids" only 8 times and the word "students" 38 times.

What do I make of this? I think as the interview progresses, and we talk about how to reach marginalized students, we become aware on some level of how the word "kids" limits students. As two educators concerned about social justice, we abandon a

“frustrated teacher” discourse (so familiar to us) which positions students as “kids” and adopt instead a “caring educator” discourse which attempts to empower “students.” We see here that we do not simply reflect our context with our language, but we seek to construct a different context through our language. Might we one day be able to speak students into being as “partners”?

Indeed, throughout this interview, Courtney and I are both conscious of our language, knowing that I will be analyzing it. Courtney in fact starts the interview by referring to her own language use when she says “Um, here I go. (Laughter) That’s how I start my sentences obviously, with ‘um’.” Later in the interview, I give Courtney a hard time for referring to our power relationship as teacher and vice principal.

Courtney: So, I, and I just want to propose this and, I, I’m not saying this because you’re my principal, or vice-principal, um...

Corinne: (Sarcastically) Thank you for bringing up our work relationship.

Courtney: (Laughter and talking over) Oh, I shouldn’t mention this on tape! You can skip through, skip through this part of your tape (laughter). But what I see...

Corinne: (Talking over) You didn’t hear that part.

This self-conscious language use has doubtless had an impact on the data. It would be interesting and revealing in other ways to analyze “teacher talk”—including my own—where the participants are not consciously thinking of the future analysis of their language.

#### Interpretation of the Power Relationship

Speaking of our relationship as vice-principal and teacher/guidance counselor within the same school, I was curious to see if our formal power imbalance would be

evidenced in the manuscript. Even the site of the interview, my office, might reinforce the power imbalance between us. How do we position ourselves?

In one exchange that made me noticeably uncomfortable, Courtney deviates from the “script” that I have given her, the series of interview questions. Although, I had told her that I wanted our interview to be more of a conversation, she took me off guard with the following improvised question:

Courtney: Another thing I’m curious about is when you said “Sometimes I, what I do now is I just bring people in and let them vent,” and that’s what you did then. How do you feel when students are venting?

Corinne: Hmm...

Courtney: Can you, can you depersonalize it?

Corinne: Sometimes.

Courtney: Yeah.

Here I use the same sort of ambiguous language that Graham does in his interview, not as a less powerful participant, but perhaps as one who finds myself less in power than I am used to. Later Courtney again improvises a question (How was your school experience?) and I more openly assert my power by evaluating the question (That’s a good question).

In spite of the power imbalance, there is a level of comfort within the conversation. We often finish each other’s thoughts, for example in the following exchange.

Courtney: I’ve been trying to do this more as I go along as a teacher, but you just...

Corinne: And there's no real easy way either, to be conscious of that. Right?  
Because we're busy and we're doing a job.

Courtney: We have thirty kids in a class or whatever so...

Corinne: And you just don't know...

Courtney: Yeah...

Corinne: ...what their lives are like. And I, I, my sense is that once a teacher knows...

Courtney: They're usually much more understanding.

As shown here, we tend to position each other favourably. For example, I excuse Courtney for sometimes struggling with marginalized students because "we're busy and we're doing a job." Courtney also excuses me. We excuse each other, and teachers in general, and consequently we maintain our (white, middle-class) innocence.

Similarly, when I express frustration with my failures with the students on the dance team, Courtney immediately positions me as a caring advocate for at-risk students (something I hope is at least mostly true) by replying "you genuinely care about the kids...the kids who need the most caring about." It is interesting that when we fracture our own stories with contradiction, the other participant is quick to restore us to that narrative "and it is true that we do struggle with the diversity of experience to produce a story of ourselves that is unitary and consistent. *If we don't, others demand of us that we do*" (Davies, 2000, p. 103).

#### Interpretation of Key Discourses

A number of themes surface in my language. I am surprised to find that I, like the students I disciplined, told a story of fear and powerlessness. Accessing the discourses

available to me, I feared a loss of status and felt powerless to change these troubling conflicts with students. Especially with Mitchell, I assumed a position of “power over,” with negative result to him certainly, and also to me as revealed by the struggle evident in my language. By the time of Graham’s fight, I had learned more, and experienced a better result. I had chosen praxis, action-reflection-action, central to a consciousness of power relations.

I see in the language of both Courtney and me two seemingly contradictory narratives: a traditional discourse of schooling, and a discourse of social justice. Indeed, we are part of both collectives, and take our identities from both storylines. One’s subjectivity necessarily borrows from contradictory discourses (Davies, 2000). We change from the first discourse to the second over the course of our conversation, as revealed by our word choice when referring to students, speaking ourselves into a different understanding.

Also reflected in our discourse is a concern with home, family, and relationships, and my role as a caregiver. I see this as a discourse of womanliness, and it colours the layers of our conversation.

Courtney: Well, and you do have a family of your own with small children and...

Corinne: Well, I do have a family, I do have small children.

Courtney: I mean, and your, your family, as a, your mom had a difficult health concern.

Corinne: My mom almost died this year. My father, um, also had a huge health issue with surgeries, and really got a serious injury. It’s been a bad year for my family and health. So that...

Courtney: It's hard to deal emotionally with, on so many levels with so many things right...

Corinne: You know, it just added so much more stress to miss work and, ah, terrible.

### Explanation

Our conversation shows our feet planted in a number of different discourses. We begin our conversation in a traditional Discourse of School, a discourse that dominates most meetings that I attend, as well as casual staff room talk. This first discourse references teacher/administration power over students, a behavioral model, student self-responsibility, behavior/consequences, a win/lose framework, an us/them model, good/bad school behavior, good/bad language, fear of threat to power, and student as "kid."

As teachers, this is a discourse that is an easy default. School culture is a holdover of an industrial society which is long gone. Schools look and are structured like factories. Society has, in the last fifty years, extended childhood by viewing teens as "kids." What real purpose do students have in our schools? Indeed in our society? Those raised within the primary discourse at least understand the expectations. Those raised outside of it exist in it in frustration at best.

Through this study, I have come to see that the thinking underlying this discourse, its most basic assumptions, are not useful to marginalized students, or to me. These assumptions may be useful, however, in removing those who are "not like us" from school.

As Courtney and I talk, we shift discourses, and begin to use words like “courage” and “love.” We stop referring to students as “kids”. This second discourse references teacher/administrator power *with* students, a constructivist model, student experiences, learning from students, listening, forced “choices,” and student as citizen. This set of values doesn’t come easily. It involves frustration and struggle for us as well. It means carving out space for this new way, sometimes putting ourselves into conflict with our colleagues.

And it comes at personal cost. This new discourse has to be balanced with contradictory discourses of gender for example, in which our primary role is as caregiver to family. Taken this way, these conflicts with students become even more charged. As a mother to my children, I fear harm to myself. What happens to them if I am threatened or hurt? As a mother figure to all children, I take it as my role to chastise students (“kids”) who are behaving badly. This new set of values also has to be balanced against a discourse of gender that requires women to be “good,” that is, not to disrupt the order of things. It is taken as a white middle class woman’s role to soothe, to nurture, and to support, not to battle it out with students in the hallway (or with staff members in meetings). This middle class family discourse directly conflicts with my role as the disciplinarian of the school (and change agent in our system).

We must resist the dualism that asks us to see one way as “good” or “bad”, one type of student or language as “good” or “bad”. To continue to exist in traditional dualistic thinking will result in increasing frustration, conflict, and violence. Nor should we simply replace one discourse with another. All discourses contain some profound

truth, and these truths often seem contradictory. They cannot be neatly organized into a series of policies or procedures.

To really provide learning for all, if all students are to belong in schools, we had better get comfortable with ambiguity.

## Chapter Seven — Reflection and Conclusions

“Spells can be broken.”

This analysis has been a deeply complex undertaking. What are the implications of all of this for me? To quote James Gee, I must continue with “relistening, paying close attention, always asking what other interpretations are possible, always placing interpretations in the broadest possible social, cultural, and political frameworks” (Gee & Crawford, 1998, p. 244).

In this chapter, I will draw conclusions about the larger disconnection between Mitchell, Graham, and the discourses of school (represented by Courtney and me) under the general social categories of age, colour, gender, and class. I will make suggestions for how I and others might begin to break the cycles of conflict in which we have engaged in the past. I will comment on the change to my own practice since beginning this research project. Finally, I will make suggestions for future research.

### Reflection and Conclusions

The discourses that Courtney and I used in these interviews (discourses of multiple meanings, fear, frustration, and change) reflect a three-way struggle which I see played out in schools each day. First, teachers and school administrators often assume that all youth have access to the supports we experienced as high school students: time, money, a place to do homework, parental support, and the scripts to approach middle class adults who can help them work out school problems and solve conflicts. We assume that our positions as teachers or as administrators alone ought to be enough to invoke obedience to our commands.

Second, we feel fear and frustration when we see traditional power-over approaches not working with marginalized youth. Some refuse to submit. Having been denied power and voice, these youth attempt to gain power by enacting the scripts of power and using the tools they have at their command: “bad” words. As we have seen with both Graham and Mitchell, they also can and do exercise the power to withdraw.

Third, we engage in a conversation about change. Many teachers know we are falling short and that our programs, that we ourselves, need to change to become more responsive to marginalized students’ realities. Indeed, I see many small acts of openness and understanding each day as teachers and other school staff listen, change, and work to reclaim youth. But these wheels of change often turn too slowly.

The language Mitchell and Graham used in these interviews—discourses of anger, blame, and powerlessness—expose a deep divide between what we claim to offer (learning for all) and what these students have experienced (I don’t belong here). But in spite of being driven out of school, neither young man can think of how school or school officials might change to make their experience more positive. They have internalized an ideology that claims it is they who are wrong, not school. They then reinforce this ideology by participating in behavior that they know will drive them out. Within months of these altercations, both boys had quit school. As Courtney says, “They just don’t fit with school.” Teachers and administrators too often accept this. We have all been taught to make individuals responsible for social ills. We have been taught not to see the systems that produce social ills.

What issues reside at this core of anger, blame, and powerlessness? I believe that the conflicts with Mitchell and Graham and their eventual exit from school were a

consequence of clashes between and within the discourses of age, colour, gender, and class. At the intersections of conflicting discourses, collisions occur.

The clash of age.

How do school authorities and school practices position youth? Nancy Lesko, in her book *Act Your Age!* suggests that “adolescence has become a comic figure, serious yet trivialized, institutionally ordained and reduced to stereotypes, commodified and malleable as a sign of futures, pasts, fears, and hopes. So viewed, the adolescent is endearing, frightening, unavoidable, and exploitable” (Lesko, 2001, p. 134). In part, it is our North American middle class view of *what adolescence is* that traps Graham and Mitchell into powerlessness.

At school, both Graham and Mitchell find themselves with an unresolvable dilemma. Teachers and school culture accept “clock time and its demand for homogeneous, public, irreversible, fragmented time.” Success for teenagers is equated with “normal [middle class] dress and deportment and by students moving up at the normal rate, one grade per year” (Lesko, 2001, p. 122). To fail to behave this way is to be dangerously other. Yet Mitchell and Graham must work nearly full time hours to support themselves and their families. They cannot progress through high school on the expected timeline, and are then positioned as failures.

Further, in spite of having adult responsibilities and needs, and in spite of being 18 years old, teachers position them as “kids.” How can these youth develop unified and stable identities when they are living lives of adult responsibility, but are seen as children and offered few choices and little power?

Changing biology and culture may intensify the confusion. The very concept of “teenager” is a relatively recent social construct; the word “teenager” was first recorded in the Oxford Dictionary in 1954. Even so, teenagehood does not seem to be what it was even a generation ago. Physical puberty is experienced years earlier on average than just a few decades ago (Abbott, 2005). And *middle class* North American culture,

no longer requires teenagers to engage in hard physical labour to assist in supporting their families, and [labour] has been replaced by a vast media empire encouraging children, at every younger and younger ages to assume the behavior and attitudes earlier associated with young adults...adolescence is now an extended period of vulnerability, starting much earlier and finishing much later than ever before...Adolescence, in the society we have recently created, has become more of a threat than a benefit, and adolescents are seen as a form of life most people want to avoid, rather than invest in for our joint futures (Abbott, 2005).

If we are to engage youth like Mitchell and Graham, we must offer them real purposeful work, partnership with us, and the power to connect their schooling to the realities of their lives. Our present form of education is dominated by “the processes of simulated learning within structured schooling” (Abbott, 2005). Yet life still demands some youth to work physically to support themselves and their families. These youth don’t fit. For Mitchell and Graham, it became “a tight call between them walking out on us, or we expelling them” (Abbott, 2005). Both happened in their stories.

#### The clash of race.

For Graham, there is another layer to the conflict, the layer of race. I use the term race while being conscious that it is our dominant discourses themselves that produce “the ‘fact’ of race as naturally occurring...rather than as a political construction” (Lesko, 2001, p. 12). Most North American white people are loathe to admit that racism exists in our communities. For Graham, racism obviously pervades his daily life. This came home

to me recently when my five-year-old son heard from another child in the school gym, and repeated to me, that pink people are better than brown people.

Graham is visibly First Nations, a fact that in our community often positions him as inferior.

*Well, um, it's everywhere I guess. It's whatever race you are and it's your own opinion how you feel about it, and like, because I'm Native people think I'm poor or I don't have lots of nice things, and that I can't do anything, like, I know that I have lots of things and I can do whatever I want, and, but a lot of people don't see that side of me, and they think all I want to do is, like drink Lysol or do whatever and get in trouble and steal, but, I'm not like that. It just makes me mad and when people say that, and I can't control what I'm going to do to them. It's not really my fault because they push me that far.*

When I first read these words of Graham's, I felt he was shamefully abdicating his own control of his behavior. He was not "taking responsibility" for his actions. This "responsibility taking" is part of the discourse of school, and I see now whom this set of thought favours.

Graham's taking of Chad's pencil appears in hindsight, not like theft (my original interpretation was that he took the pencil because he did not have one), but like a bid for friendship, an invitation to "play" before getting down to work. Chad used race intentionally to reject Graham's bid for friendship. He knew exactly how to do this, how to hurt quickly and deeply. He was protecting his own power as a white, middle-class young man. This now seems unspeakably cruel. Graham should have been angry. He was right; it was not really his fault. But neither can I blame Chad. He was a victim of the same discourse, one that blocked him from seeing another identity for himself, which would have allowed him to participate in friendship with a First Nations young man.

This discourse has been developed for centuries and will not be easily dislodged. According to Lesko (2001), our educational system was designed for white middle class boys at the turn of the century. White, middle class boys are at the centre of our school programs even today. We still idealize a certain kind of young man, and one need not look far (for example, the typical high school athletic program) to see evidence that these young men are heavily invested in by our schools, at the expense of others. At the turn of the century, the identity of the white middle class boy depended on “girls, on working-class youth, and on youth of colour, against whom they were defined as masculine, pure, self-disciplined, and courageous....the idealized strong, disciplined, white male (toward which the experts were building boys’ characters) was literally *unthinkable* without the inferior terms....In this way we see and think adolescence as always a technology of whiteness, of masculinity, and of domination, even when boys and girls of colour [are] the ones being developed” (Lesko, 2001, p. 11).

#### The clash of gender.

As a female high school administrator, I admit I am wary of the kind of double thinking required to critique gender structures within a system that requires me, at the same time, to inhabit it, or to attempt to be promoted within it. Yet it is easy to find examples of this technology of whiteness, masculinity, and domination. I think of the resources of money, time, and status that we pour into boys’ athletics in our high schools. These athletic empires come at the expense of all kinds of “others.” Few in positions of power seem to trouble the notion that this reality is appropriate or if it aligns with broader goals of learning for all. Currently only four of twenty-one high school administrators in

our system are female. We promote those most like us. This goes for staff as well as for students.

One assumption we hold in high schools is that many boys have trouble acknowledging female authority, accepting these conflicts as “That’s just the way it is.” Going back to my conflicts with Graham and Mitchell, discourses of gender clashed. Where school culture reflects a general culture in which women are subordinate to men, these young men found themselves publicly humiliated, then chastised and ordered around by me, a woman, in front of an audience of middle class girls.

Already outside of the circle of more prestigious males, the athletic “winners” in the school (like Chad), how might these young men save face? On display in this way, how might they be *read* as masculine? By going to war. By using a male power discourse of asserting dominance, arguing and swearing. Again, school accepts these strong “masculine” emotions and expressions, but only on the sports field, an arena denied to (or refused by) Graham and Mitchell. (They have no time or money for it.) A second way to save face is to exit school entirely, and both Graham and Mitchell do. Chad remains as the unchallenged winner.

My role, as vice-principal, is built upon the same male discourses and models. My language reveals the assumptions of athletics or war: “I mean you get caught in a paradigm of win and lose I guess. And you can’t lose that one in front of students.” Pair that with a contradictory discourse of womanliness that holds that I should be nurturing, motherly, and passive, and I am one conflicted administrator: “I guess you feel you have to be consistent.” These “bad words” (fuck you bitch) are easy ways for the boys to wound women teachers. They are powerful. They invoke the threat of imminent physical

and sexual abuse; this is a script many women have lived, and the boys have likely witnessed too.

### The clash of class.

Deep differences run below how these young men see the world and how school sees the world. These differences are rooted in socioeconomic class. I can't imagine a world where education is not part of one's long term life plan. We began to plan for our children's long term education before they were born. However, for Mitchell, "There's a lot of time where we're struggling. It's just hard. School is just another thing right? Something to worry about." For the middle class, education is planned and funded and central to life. For those who live in poverty, school is valued, but may become "just another thing...something to worry about." Living in poverty does not often afford people the luxury of planning ahead for their education or even their lives.

Courtney's discourse of multiple meanings suggests that school sees all students as having multiple options and resources available to them. If they fail, it is a consequence of the individual choices they have made. Schools see them as experiencing the consequences of their own actions, and not the consequences of the systems we have built and maintain. The myth that people are poor because they are lazy is more a statement about middle class values than about the decisions of people who live in poverty. This myth allows middle class people to construct themselves as hard working, and therefore superior.

I acknowledge that the contrast in world view between middle class and poverty I share here is too neat to represent the complexities of real world experience. Similarly, Ruby Payne's (2006) work can be critiqued as overly generalized. However, I find her

following ideas useful as a lens with which to understand my participants' experiences and actions:

If you want to survive in poverty, you have to be very sensory, very reactive. In poverty the important information is passed on verbally because there's less language. But in middle class – in school and work, which are middle class institutions – you have to be very verbal. You have to use words; you can't use fists to settle your disagreements. You have to be abstract, which means you can handle the paper world. And you have to be proactive; you've got to be able to plan.

But in poverty you don't have paper and you don't plan – you survive the moment. See, the bottom line is, when you can plan, you can predict. When you can predict, you know cause and effect. When you know cause and effect, you know consequence. If you don't know consequence, you can't control impulsivity (Payne, 2006).

Or, as Graham says, “I can't control what I'm going to do to them.”

#### Suggestions for Practice

Conducting this study has changed my practice. Long before I began to formalize my thoughts on paper, these conflicts with boys disappeared from my practice. I have not been sworn at by a boy at school this year, in spite of moving to a new school and having to start again with building relationships.

The changes have not been complex or difficult. I have taken Graham's and Mitchell's suggestions to heart. I try to listen for a long time before I talk. I hear all sides of the story before making disciplinary decisions. I share the hidden rules and scripts of the middle class, for example by telling students exactly how to hold themselves and what to say when apologizing to an adult in school. I try to engineer these conversations in private to avoid an audience. And I am now much more likely to find alternatives to

suspension, such as taking students to work with me at elementary school lunch programs in our city.

Systemic change is more difficult to engineer than personal change. A concerted effort is needed to bring to school staffs at all levels an awareness of how classed, gendered, aged, and raced our language, decisions and programs are. Creating a variety of schedules for completing courses, rather than treating time as a given (eg. course completed at semester end), is not difficult to do. Most high schools in our system already offer some way for students to stretch time or re-enter school more smoothly than they were able to do a few years ago. I regularly participate in dialogues around connecting school to life and making learning more authentic for marginalized students. This work has begun.

But assumptions and values around extracurricular programming are more difficult to challenge, and in some ways more central to what and whom we value in schools. The break dance team has given me a taste of how marginalized students might be fully engaged and successful in learning through connection to extracurricular programming. All students must have an avenue to our esteem. They must be involved in meaningful activity and genuine relationships, and I believe the learning will follow. We human beings are designed to learn.

There is no easy answer here. The ground will continue to shift. We now live in a world where students communicate by “texting” on cell phones, by chatting on MSN, by secretly filming scenes of school and posting this footage to the internet. These technological intrusions make these conflicts and interactions between students and staff

all the more complex. Teachers and administrators must be truly listening and humbly working to engage, teach, and retain all students.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

While doing this research, I was intrigued by other research possibilities. I admit that, while I have learned to better understand my dealings with boys, I have had some troubling conflicts with girls this school year. A similar study with the discourses of girls in conflict with school staff would be revealing.

Reading Chase's rap lyrics also captivated me. I think that these unsolicited words are powerful and political. I think of other unsolicited "bad" words that fill our schools, from rap to graffiti to the "texting" I mentioned earlier. How might these words be mined for meaning?

One of the most surprising elements of this research was the power of "teacher talk." We must examine our everyday talk, practices and policies. I was surprised by how negative Courtney and I were at times in our talk about students. Even while discussing ways to engage marginalized youth, and while aware that our conversation would be transcribed and carefully analyzed, we excused ourselves from responsibility for these youth. My instincts tell me that informal staff room talk daily reinforces negative views and damaging stereotypes of non-mainstream students. Further critical discourse analysis of talk between teachers would be useful. I would personally benefit from more strategies to head off these destructive conversations.

Gang culture places additional pressure on our schools. I wonder about the discourses of gang life, and how their systems of thought determine our students' words and actions. This is something we will have to think about in Regina in the coming years.

This has been a year with relentless headlines and pressures on school staffs, as a number of violent incidents (involving boys) have rocked our schools. I personally became involved in a physical confrontation with an angry young male outsider in my school. These hyper-masculinized “statements” surely need to be heeded.

There has been some exploration of how gang-involved youth, “who are often placed outside the possibility of school success on the basis of physical characteristics and social affiliations also use literacy as a way of exploring possible worlds, claiming space, and making their voices heard” (Moje, 2000, p. 654) through literacy practices such as graffiti and other unsanctioned literacy activities. My own exploration of these literacy activities with students on the break dance team has placed me in a contradictory space, one in which I simultaneously embody school authority and the dominant storyline (disciplining students who, for example, tag within the school or wear “gangsta” clothing) while at the same time trying to learn what these highly symbolic activities represent to the youth who practice them. With Moje (2000),

I do not claim to offer some sort of transformative or liberatory literacy tool that will work where others will not. After all, the youth I write about here will continue to face economic and social marginalization both in and out of school. In addition, schools are spaces in which powerful discourses of difference and power maintain inequitable relationships. I do argue, however, that we can become more aware of what adolescents can do and of the power and sophistication of those practices that are so often dismissed as vandalism or laziness (p. 685).

### Concluding Thoughts

Critical discourse analysis immediately appealed to me as a marriage of macro and micro analyses. I have opportunity to ask broad social, cultural, and political questions in my work every day. I have opportunity to overlay frameworks of gender, race, culture and class over daily verbal or physical conflicts and the more subtle routines

that sometimes drive students into invisibility. It is the small and large daily decisions and conversations between teachers, administrators, students and parents that create the larger discourses of school. We “word the world....We have constructed the world as it is through language and cultural practice, and we can also deconstruct and reconstruct it” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483).

I am beginning to see, thanks to Mitchell and Graham, that spells can be broken. Bad words can be re-interpreted. Each day is a grand opportunity to speak good words into the lives of students, to word a world of new possibilities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> MR (members' resources) is a term used by Faircough (1989) to refer to participants' knowledge of language, assumptions, beliefs, and values used to interpret texts.

## Appendix A – Ethical Approval

Letter of ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board, Faculty of Graduate Studies of Regina, appears on the following page.



DATE: November 3, 2005

TO: C. Miller  
3333 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue  
Regina, SK S4S 0T7

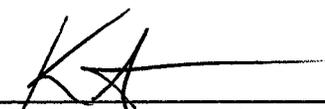
FROM: K. Arbuthnott  
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: **Bad Words: Teenage boys, the Vice-Principal and the Discourses of Conflict on a Public High School (7S0506)**

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Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

1. ACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* requires the researcher to send the Chair of the REB annual reports and notice of project conclusion for research lasting more than one year (Section 1F). **ETHICAL CLEARANCE MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS.** Clearance will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received.
2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and subsequently approved prior to beginning research. Please address the concerns raised by the reviewer(s) by means of a supplementary memo to the Chair of the REB. Do not submit a new application. Please provide the supplementary memorandum\*\*, or contact the REB concerning the progress of the project, before **January 3, 2006** in order to keep your file active. Once changes are deemed acceptable, approval will be granted.
3. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Katherine Arbuthnott

c. M. Cherland, Education, supervisor

KA/rr/ethics2.dot

\*\* supplementary memorandum should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (AH 505) or by e-mail to [research.ethics@uregina.ca](mailto:research.ethics@uregina.ca)

## Appendix B - Possible Interview Questions

1. As you read the description of what happened, what were you thinking and feeling?
2. What parts seemed right to you?
3. What parts didn't seem right?
4. What would you change in this description, if you could?
5. If you were telling the story of what happened, how would you tell it?
6. Do you think other people were involved in this conflict? If so, how?
7. What do you think happened to cause the argument?
8. Why do you think this conflict happened the way it did?
9. What else do you remember about that day?
10. What happened to you as a result of this incident?
11. How did you feel about school before this happened?
12. How do you feel about school now?
13. What was most upsetting to you about this event?
14. What positive experiences have you had at school in the past?
15. What negative experiences have you had at school in the past?
16. With whom do you spend the most time at school?
17. What might help to give you a more positive school experience?
18. How could we avoid these kinds of incidents in the future?
19. What could the vice-principal do to avoid this kind of conflict with students?
20. Tell me about your life at school.
21. Tell me about your life at home.
22. What's your life like when you're not at school?
23. Is there anything else you'd like to say, or tell me about?

## Appendix C – Possible Interview Questions for the Vice-principal

1. As you wrote this description of what happened, what were you thinking and feeling?
2. Do you think other people were involved in this conflict? Is so, how?
3. What do you think happened to cause the argument?
4. Why do you think this conflict happened the way it did?
5. What else do you remember about that day?
6. What happened to the student as a result of this incident?
7. How did you feel about school before this happened?
8. How do you feel about school now?
9. What was most upsetting to you about this event?
10. How might you avoid these kinds of incidents in the future?
11. What might you do to avoid this kind of conflict with students?
20. Tell me about your life at school.
21. Tell me about your life at home.
22. What's your life like when you're not at school?
23. Is there anything else you'd like to say, or tell me about?

## Appendix D – Recruitment Letter

Date

Hello, (name),

I am writing to you today as a graduate student with the University of Regina. I am doing educational research on a topic that I think will interest you. I am exploring the language of student-administrator conflict in school. The purpose of this study is to look at language to explain how people see the world. I want to know more about how you see things, and how I see things, so that I can understand more about how and why we have disagreed and come into conflict. I am hoping my research might make it easier for students and staff to get along together at school.

Would you be interested in discussing your experiences and opinions with me? If so, I would like to invite you to meet with me to have a conversation about your possible participation in my study.

I want to assure you that this is just an invitation. I thought of you because I believe you have ideas that would be valuable to my research. However, it will not be a problem in any way if you do not wish to participate. It will not affect our relationship in any way. If you do want to meet with me, please contact me in my office, or let one of the secretaries know that you would like to speak with me. I won't be talking about your participation with any teachers or students.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or treatment as a participant, you may contact the chair of the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina at (306) 585-4775 or by e-mail at [research.ethics@uregina.ca](mailto:research.ethics@uregina.ca).

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider this.

Sincerely,

Corinne Miller

## Appendix E – Consent form

Date

Hello     (name)    ,

As you know, I am conducting a research study as a graduate student at the University of Regina, to explore the language of student-administrator conflicts in our school. I am contacting you because you are one of the students with whom I have experienced a conflict at school. The purpose of this study is to look at language to explain how people see the world. I want to know more about how you see things, and how I see things, so that I can understand more about how and why we have disagreed and come into conflict. I am hoping my research might make it easier for students and staff to get along together at school.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to read an account, written by me, of the conflict that has occurred between us. You will be asked to participate in a conversation about the conflict, and to give your own account as part of that interview. The interview will be conducted by (school's guidance counselor's name), and will be audio taped. It will take about an hour. When the interview is complete, she will give the tape to me for analysis.

Your comments will be kept confidential. Your identity will be protected, and a pseudonym will be used in the transcripts of your interview and the research report.

Your participation in the study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will not influence or jeopardize the services you receive at the adult campus. It will not affect our relationship in any way. If you choose to participate in the interview, you may refuse to answer any questions you are asked. This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or treatment as a participant, you may contact the chair of the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina at (306) 585-4775 or by e-mail at [research.ethics@uregina.ca](mailto:research.ethics@uregina.ca).

You will receive a summary of the results of the research when the project is complete.

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign below and return this form to me. I will then contact you to arrange an interview time.

Sincerely,

Corinne Miller

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(Student signature indicating consent)