ANTI-OPPRESSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:

A RECOLLECTING JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the field of anti-oppressive education, with an intentional focus on English Language Arts (ELA). The research addressed perpetuating oppression within education, specifically in ELA. In addressing this problem, I used narrative and Indigenous methodologies as my theoretical frameworks. I feel that Indigenous methodology lies in the realm of story for the betterment of the collective group and future. Identity is (re)produced and influenced by historical background, social construction, racial identity, and religious identity which shape power relations and social positioning. Through students developing critical literacy skills, applying them to curricular material, and transferring their ways of knowing, normative ideologies can be disrupted. When students can name and recognize oppressive issues, they can begin to address them. Educators and students can move from apathy to action in empowering themselves and others to first see oppression, and then use this awareness to close the gap between the oppressed and the oppressor. Through the use of students writing autobiographies, in the mandated provincial curricular theme of “Recollections – A Journey Back”, students shared stories and reflected on their identities and how that impacts the way they saw and interacted with the world. Students articulated any struggles, epiphanies, growth, enlightenment, or thoughts on their (re)produced ideologies that have been developed and shaped from childhood experiences and educational experiences.

KEYWORDS: anti-oppressive pedagogy, narrative, Indigenous methodologies, critical literacy, autobiography, racism, white privilege, male privilege, Christian privilege, color-blind, hegemony, normative, identity.
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Who am I in the Research

McIvor (2010) believes it is necessary in Indigenous research methodologies to begin with an explanation of telling the reader who I am, what my background is, who my ancestors are, and how I have arrived at doing this work (p. 137). I am a twenty-eight year old, white, Catholic, heterosexual, English speaking, middle-class, rurally raised, female. My stories define me as an individual with differences and similarities to other people. Thus far, I have been influenced by my historically situated, socially constructed, racial identity, gender identity, learned identity, and religious identity which have allowed me to develop an individual identity, power relations, and social positioning. All of these biological and social aspects have influences on me and will continue to do so throughout my life and throughout my career as a teacher. It is important never to assume or deem something irrelevant, because “Indigenous research is when we are connected to all that is around us, such as family, ancestors, the land, and the cosmos” (p. 139). To be an effective anti-oppressive teacher I must first know myself and what I am bringing into the classroom before I can understand how I may influence students.

My family history has had an influence on me. I have and do experience white privilege. My father’s family originated in France and Belgium; my mother is adopted, so historical information is missing, making her side more difficult to follow. As she was adopted, I could only get information on my biological grandmother’s side of the family. Her family originated in Poland. My background is unique because I have the opportunity to trace three family histories. Nonetheless, my ancestors were white, middle-class, Catholic, settlers. My adoptive grandparents are not part of my biological history, but
they are an important part of my life and influenced me as I grew up, therefore I think it is relevant to note their historical background. These grandparents and their families are from Germany. So I come from a lot of places and I have many different historical paths to trace my identity and my historical background.

Regardless of which of the three paths resonate most with me, they all point to one thing: privilege. The privilege in my life includes: white privilege, Christian privilege, middle-class privilege, all of which affirm a narrative of a strong belief in meritocracy. I have been taught that “innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character and integrity” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 1) will allow me to achieve and experience all that I want. And, for the most case, this is true in my set of circumstances. Meritocracy does exist in my world because I am part of what society deems the norm. I am part of dominant groups. I am part of accepted, recognized, and normalized group. I received an equitable education from teachers with whom I related to because, “the quality of schools and the quality of educational opportunity vary according to where one lives, and where one lives depends on familial resources and race” (p. 8). Therefore, because “discrimination not only suppresses merit; it is the antithesis of merit” (p. 8) I believed meritocracy existed. I was not faced with discrimination; therefore, my world seemed to be filled with open doors. The doors were not being shut in my face from oppression, discrimination, or racism. I was not taught to think critically, was blinded by irrationality, and could not comprehend the dynamics of reality – I misinterpreted it (Freire, 1997, p. 5). Because in the world I grew up in, I perceived people to be hardworking and honest. I believed everyone had a strong sense of community, went to church, and treated all people equally. My childhood perceptions
of my surroundings were inaccurate and biased. I can now recognize that it is important to “acknowledge that inheritance, luck, and a variety of other circumstances beyond control of individuals are important in affecting where one ends up in the system” (McNamme & Miller, 2004, p. 10). Beyond that, after many years of studying, reflecting, and choosing to enter a “new” reality, a reality where I know more and therefore know better, I have begun to unveil the world. In this unveiled world, when I step out of the comforts provided by what society deems as privileged, centralized, and normalized, I see a world of oppression. Of relevance here, I do not see myself as a liberator of the oppressed, but I have committed myself to stand at the side of the oppressed (Freire, 1997, p. 21). Evolving and critically awakening begins my transformation.

I grew up on a farm in southern Saskatchewan in a farming community that is strictly white. Mackey (1999) explains silent, non-threatening differences (like the French, German, and Ukrainian) were accepted and embraced in Canada, but specifically Saskatchewan, because they acted as some of the province’s “token” examples of diversity. All of my grandparents were white settlers who settled new homesteads in the province, which displaced the Aboriginals who were forced onto reserves. My families became part of an oppressive political project - an opportunity to create a Canadian mythical identity of “the gentle Mounties and picturesque Indians” (Mackey, 1999, p.34) which, in reality, was a series of negotiated treaties “pushing the native people aside as quickly as possible” (p. 34). The pushing aside metaphor is relevant where I grew up. Aboriginal people lived on the reserves and were faced with severe experiences of racism. By the country relocating Aboriginal people, Mackey suggests the nation believed that the “Indians” would peacefully and quietly disappear, making assimilation a
success. Sterzuk (2011) writes about examples of the “evidence of the effects of colonialism in producing societal inequity and racialized identities in Saskatchewan” (p. 2). Unfortunately, one significant example is the role of settler schools “in producing and re-producing domination, subjugation and exclusion in settler societies” (p. 2).

Similarly, the school I attended contributed to creating a racialized hierarchy and ideologies in our settler community. I was never taught a critical view or perspective of Canadian history. The school I attended housed everyone from kindergarten to grade twelve. In my thirteen years of formal public education, I never had a class with any students of a different cultural background or race. My only experience with Aboriginal people was if I saw a formal traditional dance at a school cultural day, or if we competed against an Aboriginal sports team. Mackey (1999) discusses this isolation as she mocks the idea that the political national identity tried to present the romanticized idea of Aboriginals as “guardians of the land, as allies in progress, and as representatives of Canada’s heritage” (83). Racial hierarchies are preserved through tokenized experiences such as the ones I had.

With my limited exposure of other cultural backgrounds, races, religions, and languages, I was in dire need of a critical awakening prior to becoming a teacher. I must take my journey as a reflective teacher more seriously than someone with exposure to differences. My childhood was not an accurate representation of how this world truly is. In my family, we never spoke directly about race, but I learned that all people are equal. This is what I was taught by my parents who are not aware of white racial knowledge, white privilege, or racialization. In my unpacking (McIntosh, 1988) and understanding of knowledge and truth that I acquired from my family of origin and the institutions I grew
up in, I was imbued with the value of being color blind, to act as though racial differences either did not exist or at the very least were not important in determining someone’s place in life. I belonged within a “framework of understanding, one that [does not] provide an analyses on power relations of political, historical, and ideological contexts that give rise to environments” (Walton, 2005, p. 55) where we continue to maintain systems of power. One can only be privileged, if another is oppressed. Olsson (1997) articulates this experience in that, “[b]y saying we don’t see their colour we are also saying we do not see our whiteness. This denies their experiences of racism and our experience of privilege” (p. 17). Knowledge is a social construction; therefore, as an adult, I have to be aware of who constructs that knowledge and in whose interests the knowledge is constructed. I am a teacher who must be diligent in what knowledge I construct with my students and what knowledge or myths we can debunk. We have to be aware and be critical of the people with authority, power, and knowledge or else the status quo will be perpetuated. People embody subjectivities that are historically and socially produced; the discourses of power affect how people understand themselves.

Therefore, it is important to consider the people who influenced me the most. These people were my parents, grandparents, friends, and the community members - all of whom were white, Christian, middle-class people. Social classes are learned from families, schooling, and the hidden curriculum. Therefore, “[o]ne’s social class is a result of the relationship one has, largely through one’s work, to physical capital and its power, to other people at work and in society, to one’s own productive activity (Anyon, 1994, p. 256). I developed as a person under the influences of these people. I believe that the previous generations of my family had more racist ideologies than do current generations.
Prior generations believed in a fully Eurocentric point of view and feeling of white superiority or even supremacy. This belief system has had “very serious implications on individuals’ sense of self and their identity development, for they begin to see themselves through the lens of the dominant group” (Blumenfeld, 2006, p.199). My family’s attitudes and beliefs were produced by cultural imperialism [which] involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experiences and culture, and its establishment as the norm . . . through hegemonic discourses, thereby rendering subordinate groups virtually invisible while simultaneously constructing stereotypes about these groups. (p. 199)

As a child, I did not know what my whiteness meant in a societal context and did not grasp the power inherent in this positioning.

I had never thought about my racial identity until my first undergraduate class, at the University of Regina, with Dr. Carol Schick. I am so grateful that I was exposed to anti-racist education within my first year of university studies. Without that opportunity, I may not have benefited from the knowledge provided to me which opened my mind to the social constructs of power within schools, communities, and the world. Throughout my educational journey including doing this research I knew it was important to consider and write my own autobiography. I incorporate autobiography into my anti-oppressive educational pedagogy in my classes, because I believe it “gives students the opportunity to understand personally how their own education developed through a combination of their own individual life circumstances, personality, and family, with dominant social conditions of their gender, race, and class” (Rousmaniere, 2000 p. 88). I know how important it is to recognize “the students’ and teachers’ biographical, historical and social
situations that they bring into the classroom” (p. 89) if anti-oppressive pedagogy or extraordinary conversations (Weis, 2001) is ever to take place in schools.

1.2 The Context of the Research

This qualitative study explores the responses of high school students to anti-oppressive education through critical literacy skills, literature study, and then reflection and a critique of self through story, specifically, through autobiography. I am interested in observing students’ heightened awareness of oppression, their potential movement from apathy to action, and their motivation to chip away at society’s oppressive boundaries. For the purpose of this study, critical literacy refers to Misson and Morgan’s (2006) understanding that texts are deeply rooted in the cultural contexts in which they are produced and read. It means identifying the ideology inscribed in any text, determining who benefits from the very partial representation of the world offered in a text, resisting any invitations to comply with worldviews that are socially unjust, and taking verbal or other action to redress such injustices. (p. 3)

The context of the study is a Grade 11 class, studying a required course, English Language Arts 20. I chose the course because the major theme prescribed by the provincially-mandated curriculum is Childhood Recollections which aligns with my interest in studying autobiography. In the thesis I will refer to the course as ELA 20. The participants in this study are grade 11 students from a low to middle income, from varying backgrounds, and journeying on different academic paths. Set in an inner-city prairie high school with a population of approximately 665 students, it is valuable to note the multilingual nature of the school. It has a significant number of students
(approximately 60) whose first language is not English. During the year the study took place, the site had students who spoke Tagalog, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai, Danish, Ukrainian, French, and Portuguese as their first languages. As well, approximately one third of the student body (665) and half of the students in the class participating in the study, were enrolled as French Immersion high school students. Students in the study include six girls and five boys. The class included students who have English as a second language (ESL). I am the researcher and the teacher. To be a teacher who practices anti-oppressive education I believe I must know myself and what I am bringing into the classroom before I can understand how I may influence my students. I believe in what Paulo Freire (1997) suggests about situations of oppression in that “people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 29). The structures of domination and oppression need first to be shaken, and then dismantled.

1.3 Arriving at the Burning Questions

In 2001, I embarked on my first post-secondary educational journey. I was accepted to study secondary education with an English major at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. Everything about my undergraduate studies was new, frightening, and unknown. I moved from a rural life to a new city; I began my classes; I did my assignments. This is what I thought university was. No one in my family had ever been to university before, and I did not realize that this new academic chapter in my life would lead me on a journey the results of which I could have never predicted. My four years of undergraduate studies were filled with content that included: language awareness,
Canadian literature, African-American prose, residential school literature, eighteenth century-comedy, twentieth century poetry, Holocaust literature, and an array of literary genres. I learned many critical literacy lessons from these classes, but one main theme began to emerge: why had I not been taught this in high school?

My secondary education classes included content on education and multicultural societies, issues in secondary English education, and education foundations which focused on awareness on many oppressive areas in education: gender, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, race, and ability. I was immersed, for the first time, in conversations about important oppressive issues. I became aware of issues in education of perpetuating oppression rather than creating safe and equitable education environments. I was exposed to a different narrative of public education than I had experienced. The seemingly benign neutral story of meritocracy, color-blindness, white privilege, and Christian privilege was disrupted. I became aware of how racism can operate and exist in society and within schools. I was awakened (perhaps even slightly nudged) and have not been able to close my eyes since. I can never go back to the ignorance that once guided my life. I can only continue to try to become further awakened and attempt to wake others along the way. My undergraduate education began the journey of my professional life as a teacher and sparked my burning questions as a researcher.

Since those years of university, my years of teaching, and the experiences from graduate classes I have taken since, I have continued to wonder about education. I have been bewildered by the oppression in education, and more specifically in English education. I have been far too surprised that history and politics invade our educational environments and construct our ideologies. Now some may not have been as surprised as
I was when I truly began to understand the implications of such ideologies, but I was troubled that I was produced to oppress. Educational environments, I believe, must be spaces where inequities and uninformed opinions must be challenged and debunked. Yet, it appears that these spaces are perpetuating oppressive ways of thinking instead. My concern was heightened considerably after reading more in the field of anti-oppressive education. I was influenced by the candor of one particular work, and I knew I wanted to be part of speaking a different truth. In her book *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, Eva Mackey (1999) presents a perspective on Canadian identity and the Canadian political scene. In Canada, the term “multiculturalism” is used in “relation to the unmarked, yet dominant, Anglo-Canadian core culture” (p. 2). She challenges previous understandings of Canadian society and presents critical responses to how power is socially constructed in Canada. Mackey is personally concerned and dedicated to confronting issues that limit identity and belonging. These limitations, including oppression based on language, race, religion, and power, are constructed globally, economically, and politically and therefore, play a dominant role in education. I knew I wanted to advocate for change and I knew my platform was education. Simply put, my new motivation was overwhelming, as I found I had far more questions than I did answers – as is the case with many important and significant issues.

Floodgates were opened and the questions kept pouring in. I began the mountainous job of informing myself further. Yet, I was left with several unanswered questions. Without being able to name oppressive issues, how can educators and students address them? How will educators empower themselves and others to awaken to defy
passivity and apathy? Following anti-oppressive practices that name oppressive issues will students be motivated or engaged to actively close a gap, to create a sense of urgency, in order to create a social awareness to chip away at these oppressive boundaries that continue to separate humanity? This study originated from not having satisfactory answers to my questions.

Therefore, this qualitative research explores if and how grade eleven students can connect and analyze literature through an anti-oppressive lens to discuss and to recognize power relationships of inequity. Like most people, high school students lack political understandings of concepts of race, gender, religious ideology, and sexual orientation as social markers. Energy and attention must be focused on this topic because bullying and “high school dropout rates, suspension rates, incarceration rates” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48) are direct results of this lack of anti-oppressive awareness. Many students have been “labelled” over the years. By the time I meet them in high school, they “know” so much about themselves, that to create opportunities for “new” ways of thinking is a very difficult task. I have learned over the years, that if I want to provide anti-oppressive education, I could not make assumptions about my students. Sometimes I still do. I caught myself believing many of my assumptions. Were my students often weak readers and writers? Yes. Did all of my students like school? No. Were many labelled and marginalized their entire lives? Yes. Had racism played a factor in their identity development? Yes. Did some come from impoverished homes? Yes. Did they bring many personal issues into the classroom? Yes. In fact, my assumptions existed because in some cases, they were true. It was then I realized that applying those assumptions to an entire group was my first act of oppression. Therefore, I realized I had
to stop with the assumptions, and start asking questions. When I did not understand, I asked my students questions. And when I did not comprehend a situation they told me about, I asked for clarification. And, when I did not know what some of the words/slang they used meant, I asked them. They told me. They always answered my questions frankly. I just asked and asked and asked for years. And, my students figured out that they were no longer being inaccurately labelled within the classroom. I was not inaccurately labeling them because I was an amazing teacher, or because I was going to “help” them. I was not inaccurately labelling them because I was the clichéd “heroic” teacher that was going to show them to the “truth” or allow them to truly be “successful.” The only reason the students were no longer being inaccurately labelled within my classroom, was because I asked questions. They gave me answers. They had a voice. Therefore, labels could no longer exist. Only my students’ stories existed. The students’ realities: their truths. I only asked questions. Once I made this my common practice I believed there were significant opportunities to then provide students with classroom experiences that encouraged students to develop critical literacy skills while we journeyed through an anti-oppressive foundation and opportunities of study.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A senior English Language Arts (ELA) classroom can be an effective site to implement and conduct anti-oppressive education. This study argues that an investigation of anti-oppressive education is needed in ELA. Is it possible to implement anti-oppressive education in the current education system in Saskatchewan? Ultimately, the professional literature suggests minor acceptance of differences rather than equitable educational opportunities. It seems that society deems the norm as being white, male, English speaking, Christian, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Research (Cook, 1996; Dei, 2007; Leonardo, 2009; Pennycook, 1989; Walton, 2005) discusses how inequalities exist and operate within classrooms. In fact, there are more serious implications in the findings. Graham and Slee (2008) discuss “the rule of the norm is statistically derived, negating the diversity to be found within nature and the naturalness of diversity” (p. 281). The unnamed norms oppress differences and marginalized groups. Therefore, systems of privilege are maintained by individuals’ differences and language education is one of these major areas where suppression of difference occurs.

I deemed the following literature significant in my exploration guiding and conducting this study. The areas included in this section respond to the research questions: without being able to name oppressive issues, how can students and educators address them? How will educators empower themselves and others to awaken to defy passivity and apathy? Following anti-oppressive practices, will students be motivated to close the gap and chip away at oppressive barriers? More specifically, this chapter focuses on: an explanation of the use of student autobiography; how education is oppressive; the current context of oppression in English Language Arts in Saskatchewan,
thus, creating a need for anti-oppressive education; a movement towards anti-oppressive ELA- development of critical literacy skills and curricular facilitation.

2.1 Writing Our Stories: Student Autobiography

This study utilized autobiography. For this study, autobiography is defined as self-study and story-telling narrative to reflect and situate ourselves “into the context of our lives” (Mulholland & Longman, 2009, p. 213). Autobiography can be used to encourage “students to question their assumptions, particularly about those beliefs and practices they understand to be neutral, normative, and ‘natural’” (p. 217). Robert Lake (2010) believes that education can be transcended or reconstructed through personal story. Challenging norms “must be a vital and ongoing part of the field of education and one of the best ways to approach this is through personal stories” (p. 43). Classrooms are filled with personal stories, and I believe if we are to awaken to a social awareness, we must start with ourselves – our own stories. In fact, Deborah Youdell (2006) writes about the importance of acknowledging who students are biographically. Where students come from should not be taken for granted. Who the students are and how they learn has much to do with background. It may be possible that students begin to understand themselves not as “pre-existing, self-knowing, and continuous, but as subjectivated through [their] ongoing constitution in and by discourse” (p. 35). I have applied these ideas to the importance of acknowledging personal stories, and believe that through student autobiographies, change can be affected.

Inequalities can be addressed when students see they are products of their environments and particular types of discourses. Youdell writes, “taking up these understandings not only enables us to better understand the endurance of particular
configurations of educational inequalities, it also opens up new possibilities for interrupting these” (p. 33). McKinley, Brayboy, and McCarty (2010) emphasize the importance recognizing where we come from because we are shaped and connected by the world; there is no separation. In fact, “holistic understandings do not draw separation between the body and mind, between humans and other earthly inhabitants, or between generations of humans. Instead, connections, are central for knowledge production and the responsible uses of knowledge” (p. 190). Students writing about themselves, their backgrounds, their experiences are all opportunities to express the connectedness or disconnectedness they feel within different environments and discourses. Wang and Yu (2006) use writing autobiography to challenge students’ understandings of self; “writing autobiography can capture the complexity of a person’s life in its lively depiction of multiple layers of human experiences, which shows a process of identity-in-making rather than a static picture of the self fixed in social construction” (p. 32). I have used the writing an autobiography as an anti-oppressive strategy in moving students from apathy to action.

My research goals aim for student motivation and engagement in creating a sense of urgency to create social awareness and change. Writing autobiographies provide a platform for this change to take place. Charles Berryman (1999) writes about the ways we can define or construct meaning of self and that “the politics of race, class, and gender is finally seen to have influenced, if not demanded, the current interest in and need for theories of autobiography” (p. 2). In this context, like that of Nado Aveling’s (2001), the use of autobiography is “a political, intellectual project devoted to transformation” (p. 41). It is a tool used to analyze our lives (naming oppressive issues) and to disrupt our
assumptions (moving from apathy to action) about normative ways of knowing. Aveling believes that autobiographical narrative can be used as a “springboard for change” (p. 45). It may “inform a pedagogy of possibility” (p. 46). Through ELA, accomplishing social awareness and potential change may be possible.

2.2 If We Can’t Name the Issues, How Can We Address Them?

2.2.1 How Education Perpetuates Oppression: Produces and (Re)produces

Anti-oppressive education is an orientation that opposes the damage being caused by dominant power and privileged groups in schools. Both students and teachers need to understand and then see oppressive issues before the issues can be addressed. Dei (2007) describes the experience of oppressive education as trauma, in which an oppressed person’s life is “built on fear, violation and panic” (p. 127). Dei explains that this trauma continues for an oppressed individual “while [the privileged are] turning a blind eye to the multiple atrocities that torment, violate, and oppress generations” (p. 127). Recognizing the reality of oppression can only begin when individuals can see the “pain and the ongoing nature of suffering” (p. 128). Therefore, Dei’s goal is to develop a critical consciousness that will bring some comprehension of the full effects of “dispossession, deprivation, and discrimination” (p. 128). An ELA classroom can be a place, a pedagogical environment, to support Dei’s claim that a critical consciousness must be awakened. Oppression and the active choice of banality isolate and torture the oppressed.

Unfortunately, children growing up in a system of oppressive education, “will often develop a sense of helplessness with respect to fighting the system” and it may become less traumatic to “go with the flow” (p. 137) which is a form of assimilation. The
oppressed live through experiences of violation because of white privilege, Christian privilege, male privilege, and native speakers of the dominant language, which in this case, is English. Kumashiro (2009) explains that schools indirectly teach students to fit “into” a white-dominated racial hierarchy. Verna St. Denis (2007) discusses the effects of racialization on subjects and how it continually affects Aboriginal families and communities historically, legally, and politically (p. 1068). I believe recognition of self and other will be the foundation for change in schools. By this, I mean that teachers have to change what the normative ideologies and frameworks are through education and what labels we place on home and communities. These families and communities who are positioned as minorities have been oppressed by our educational systems, because our systems have silenced and traumatized them, throughout multi-generational oppression. Andrea Sterzuk (2011) refers to Saskatchewan as a settler society “where a large number of Europeans, and subsequently others, settled on land seized from Indigenous peoples and made the new settlements their permanent homes” (p. 1). I agree with Sterzuk’s assertion because it is through colonization that the multi-generational oppression is still perpetuated. In Saskatchewan schools white privilege is the norm; middle class experience is the norm. A commitment to anti-oppressive education “could provide a foundation to forge alliances between diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in a common search for social justice in education” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1068). Based on St. Denis’ statement, I believe an ELA classroom can become an environment that does not contribute to this oppressive norm any longer. Yet, there is so much change needed because education systems still perpetuate oppression.
2.2.2 Education Can Be Psychologically Traumatizing

Students can become traumatized when they are continually forced to be in oppressive spaces. To be degraded and made to feel inferior can lead to a loss of self and identity. Here, self is defined as one’s identity and sense of worthiness within that identity. Also relevant is Bruce Parker’s (2009) explanation that our sense of self “continuously influences how [we] think and understand, and what [we] know and decide not to know” (p. 5). When sense of self is challenged or is not accepted, the oppressor has successfully recreated the position of dominance, because the traumatized people position themselves in relation to the oppressor. Jarvis (1999) writes that “examining positioning and subjectivity can help lead to an understanding of both how we are constructed and how, individually and collectively, we may oppress, be oppressed, and exercise agency” (p. 259). Amy Vetter (2010) explores positioning in ELA classrooms. She explains that student identities, informed by sex, race, class, sexuality, and religion influence how they position themselves within the classroom. Positioning depends on and is altered by the people and roles in the classroom, issues of power, entitlement, and the contexts and discourses surrounding the student (p. 35-36). When an oppressed person positions him/herself in relation to a dominant figure, the effects of oppression have been solidified and systems of power have been preserved. The preservation of these positions maintains a space where traumatic experiences will continue for the oppressed subject.

Dei (2007) explains that the oppressed are “faced with daily traumas arising in racism’s discursive claims to the “truth” of our general inferiority and the degeneracy of our histories, culture, heritages, and skins” (p. 141). Therefore, the inferiorization of the oppressed creates a problem in society for all people because “traumatic experiences of
social stigmatization will also commonly deter the racially oppressed from planning for the future or looking to the future with hope and expectation” (p. 142). Without attempting to provide effective anti-oppressive education, we are hardening the boundaries between dominant and oppressed groups, instead of weakening or eradicating these barriers.

2.2.3 English Education that Maintains Systems of Privilege

John Willinsky (2000) writes about the colonial origins of the teaching of English and dates it back to the nineteenth century in India under the British colonial control. He explains that from India to Canada, English education was built upon the notion of civilization and salvation through literary study. And although we, English teachers, have “long since secularized literature teaching, our tendency is still to focus on the ethical and moral dilemmas raised by literary works, which continues the civilizing mission at this teaching trade’s origins” (p. 5). Because of this, ELA often serves to reproduce and maintain power relations of inequality. Dion (2007) discusses that there is a the need for “an investigation of the extent to which belief systems have become internalized to the point that many teachers unsuspectingly rely on dominant discourses to give structure to their approach to teaching without recognizing the inadequacy nor questioning the effects of those discourses (p. 332). Therefore, to remedy this internalized discourse, anti-oppressive pedagogy should empower students to stand up to authorities, to question what others do, to reflect on personal assumptions, and to consider what is taken for granted. R.W. Connell (1993) argues that knowledge and hegemony are socially created. Applying this notion to education can be beneficial for students to understand “the organization of school curricula was created by particular social processes, by particular
people with particular points of view” (p. 30). Students have developed critical literacy skills when they can answer questions about literature and its motives, its agenda, its approach, and its goals.

I am arguing that ELA is a fruitful site for anti-oppressive pedagogy. In advancing ELA education, I mean to use the practice of ELA for enlightenment, to create critical literacy skills, and to serve as a voice against oppression. To begin, ELA teachers must consider which identities are privileged; why and how identities intersect and interact; how they are always evolving; and what the effects of different levels of privilege are within the classrooms, institutions, and societies. Stephanie Vandrick (2009) encourages teachers, researchers, and students to take responsibility for acknowledging “their own (our) privilege and its ramifications in our educational settings” (p.3) and in our approaches to teaching. Similarly, Alaistair Pennycook (1989) believes “all the fundamental inequalities, particularly those based in class, race, and gender differences” (p. 590) exist within classrooms. Teachers need to awaken to how oppression and privilege operate within their classrooms.

Anti-oppressive practices are not trouble-free as they often times make us uncomfortable with “how we think and feel about not only the Other, but also ourselves” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 5). Once this awakening or critical realization occurs, only then can oppressive norms be challenged. This is when there is a need for turning anti-oppressive educational theory into effective pedagogy. Of relevance here, is Denise Davila’s (2011) work in investigating the outcomes of discussions about race and the roles of critical guides in a senior ELA classroom. She recognizes a significant gap between pre-service teachers’ knowledge of theories and the infusion of those theories in effective pedagogy
with students in the classroom (p. 14). I would go so far as to say that the disconnect does not end with pre-service teachers, but includes in-service teachers, thus the need for further research and the need for all teachers to be engaged in effective anti-oppressive practice. Anti-oppressive work will always be uncertain and challenging: debunking untruths, providing counterstories, disrupting discourses, having uncomfortable conversations, and guiding personal journeys to a critical awakening. The path to accomplishing awareness is difficult as it requires teachers to act as critical guides who must make calculated decisions in how to explore the comments and stories students generate in writing or in discussion. As well, anti-oppressive education requires the teacher to decide how and when critical literacy skills will be employed (p. 15). In teaching critical literacy skills, students and teachers develop new ways of knowing, because literacy and language are acquired socially. When familiar ways of knowing are challenged and disrupted, this space is not comfortable, but it is necessary for anti-oppressive praxis.

Normative power structures of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion are absorbed by students without questioning. Students find themselves both inside and outside of society’s norms. Anti-oppressive education is needed for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Students who are not exposed to critical awareness opportunities will not question norms or how they exist. More importantly, students who have been marginalized often stay silent. Educators often “fail to recognize the extent that texts always reflect and often attempt to enforce various forms of ideological control of readers” (Tuman, 1998, p. 33). Therefore, educators have to put theory into practice, and provide students with opportunities to challenge societal boundaries. Power is socially
constructed; therefore, educational environments need to change through means of critical literacy and anti-oppressive pedagogy. Oppression is maintained by silence.

2.2.4 Identity Shaping

Identity continues to be shaped within classrooms; therefore, not all students have equitable educational opportunities. The oppressed are subjugated in a position of otherness so the dominant groups can exist as powerful. There is a white way of knowing racial power (Aveling, 2006; Dyer 1997; Gallagher, 2003; Goodman, 2001; Leonardo, 2004, 2009; McIntosh, 1988) that refabricates the ideologies which maintain white privilege. This white way of knowing has been at the foundation of curricula and classrooms. Educators must first recognize whiteness in education and then reflect on the implications before change is possible.

Robin Peel (2000) suggests that teaching language, especially English, can be oppressive if we do not “explore the possibility that the practices of English and the specific strategies which English specialists employ are as much to do with the process of contributing to the formation of a particular kind of person as they are with the more obvious concerns of literacy and freedom” (p. x). Equally important is the question: what is English for? Peel discusses Foucault’s ideas of power construction and asserts that teaching English often times reinforces the hierarchical views of social power, of white power, and of native English dominance (p. 8). Tuman (1998) claims that pedagogical practices in language instruction are matters of authority and tradition. Willinsky (2000) also explains that English literature was originally meant for purposes of civilization; “English was intended to offer Indian students much of the same opportunity to know greatness that Latin served British students in the public schools of Britain” (p. 4).
Therefore, giving students critical literacy learning opportunities may more evenly
distribute “power and wealth by giving students from lower social groups with relatively
less power and wealth one tool they can use to help correct the system: critical literacy as
a means of political empowerment” (Tuman, 1998, p. 12). Racialization affects identity
and belonging in classrooms. Relevant in Saskatchewan, anti-oppressive education could
potentially create a platform to “forge alliances between diverse Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal communities in a common search for social justice in education” (St. Denis,
2007, p. 1068). Therefore, it is possible for ELA educators to critically address the issues
of dominance and oppressive political agendas if they desire and are educated to
understand the importance of such pedagogy.

I say educators have the opportunity to change the dominant norms within our
classrooms. I believe we can make changes by addressing our assumptions and
questioning our ideologies and discourses through education. Marginalized students have
been institutionally oppressed for multiple generations within the current educational
systems because our systems have silenced and traumatized them. A “hidden curriculum
of whiteness saturates everyday school life and one of the first steps to articulating its
features is coming to terms with it specific modes of discourse” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 144).
Once we can see and name the oppression permeating in education, then we can begin to
address it.

The privileged often choose silence and plead ignorance about truly seeing
oppression. Hence the attraction to color-blindness and an open resentment and resistance
to anti-oppressive pedagogy. Kevin Kumashiro (2009) explains further and suggests “[i]t
is not our lack of knowledge but our resistance to knowledge and our desire for ignorance
that often prevents us from changing the oppressive status quo” (p. 27). Therefore, it is a choice of apathy or action. Educators have the opportunity to use their platforms for change. I will not stand silent.

Elie Wiesel (1996) took a profound stance against all oppression in his *Nobel Acceptance Speech* delivered in Oslo, Norway on December 10, 1986. In the speech, he attempted to give a voice to all oppressed people, and suggested that far too many dominant and privileged people in society are aware bystanders and, yet “remain silent. And that is why [he] swore never to be silent whenever wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented” (p. 118). I feel I have a responsibility to create a "voice" in the attempt to speak to oppression, by providing students with an opportunity for awareness, for growth, for interruption, for togetherness, and for humanizing what has been dehumanized.

2.3 The Current Context: An ELA Site of Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

If we accept that the discussion of oppression in literature study can provide students meaningful opportunities to raise significant questions, to recognize inequalities, and to comprehend how power is socially constructed, then more ELA classrooms and other curricular areas should implement this approach. To study oppression through literature, for the purpose of the research, is to consider various genres, ideas and approaches, including: themes of oppression; stories of oppression; stories of the oppressor; the counter-story; voice interpretation; the absent voice; and patterns and structures of oppression that exist in language. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) write that “many scholars use parable, chronicles, stories, counterstories, poetry, fiction, and
revisionist histories to illustrate false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine” (p. 57). Glasgow (2001) suggests that reading literature may cause students to think about ways that race, privilege, sex, and social class privilege were shown in the events of a story. Students can then begin to decipher privileged roles found in curricular texts. Once students develop critical literacy skills (Misson & Morgan, 2006) and understand that texts are created and read in cultural, historical, and political contexts that perpetuate ideologies and can apply them to literature studied, they will then begin to see the ideologies in texts that privilege or marginalize some matters. Students can then relate to texts in recognizing how privilege and/or oppression operate in their lives. Promoting reflection on self, applying that awareness to a student’s own narrative in the form of an autobiography, can allow students an outlet, a voice, to tell their stories and to validate their experiences in a way they may have never done. Naming one’s reality is twofold; it can affect the oppressed and the oppressor. Storytelling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) can be used as a means of reclaiming voice and healing, a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression. The story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself. Finally, naming one’s own reality with stories can affect the oppressor. . . the dominant group justifies its power with stories . . . The ‘voice’ component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice. (p. 57-58)
It is through understanding systems of privilege, learning how society operates, how identity affects one's experiences, and how being able to name the issues that the first step in change is taken.

At this time it is important to further discuss whiteness and how the concept is relevant in my theoretical framework. Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) famous “Unpacking the White Knapsack” essay has helped educators understand the unnamed privileges that come with whiteness. Zeus Leonardo (2009) builds upon McIntosh’s work and attempts to expose white racial hegemony; dominance is gained and maintained through race relations in society and the classroom. The concept of white privilege must be addressed in anti-oppressive pedagogy because as Leonardo (2009) suggests whites “do not grow up with a race discourse, do not think of their life choices in racial ways, and do not consider themselves as belonging to a racial group” (p. 231). Unfortunately, many whites do not understand that their experiences are part of a system that provides white privilege. In fact, the system creates two main ways of belonging (Leonardo, 2009), for whites: “[o]ne, Whites are born into a world that is racially harmonious with their sense of self. . . Two, it does not take long for White children to recognize that the world belongs to them, in the sense that Whites feel a sense of entitlement or ownership” (p. 231). Recognizing white privilege and analyzing the power relations within literary texts which are the staple of ELA teaching can serve as a valuable example of privilege and oppression for students. Allison Jones (1999) suggests that there is a silence surrounding whiteness, and writes about the importance of no longer ignoring the borders of race or overlooking privilege because that maintains silence and white privilege. She highlights the importance of not “erasing the borders of ethnic identity” (p. 304) because
acknowledging difference is important in working across these differences. Some may call this multicultural education, but I want to now make clear the differences between anti-oppressive pedagogy versus multiculturalism in this study.

Multiculturalism is often more of an examination of how minority groups adapt, how they are assimilated, or how they have resisted mainstream culture in ELA. St. Denis (2011) defines multiculturalism including several points suggesting it is a “political strategy that was introduced as a way to address contesting language, cultural, and land claims within a nation” (p. 307). She also suggests multiculturalism was a policy introduced under Prime Minister Trudeau’s government in 1971, that attempted to acknowledge the need for “increased understanding between ethnic groups”, and problems arising from racial discrimination in Canada (p. 307). St. Denis suggests there are some problems with multiculturalism. Specifically, often times multiculturalism creates social division; maintains previously existing separation; and perpetuates misunderstandings because it places groups of people against each other in power relations – it spotlights the “cultural others” (p. 308). St. Denis goes so far to say that “[d]iscourses of multiculturalism enable racism and colonialism, and thereby impact and limit the work of Aboriginal teachers” (p. 308). I continue here by adding that it maintains comfort and neutrality for white teachers.

Mackey (1999) also critiques multiculturalism. The ‘national’ story of Canada as a multicultural nation is created and sustained throughout the ELA curriculum in Saskatchewan, as well as others. Unfortunately, the diverse national identity pervasive in curriculum documents does not provide an authentic perspective of the racial and cultural genocide of primarily First Nations people caused by policies of Canadian systems. A
lack of awareness or what Kumashiro (2001) calls “partial knowledge” is not knowing fully about the other, and the information that is claimed as knowledge is often “mis-knowledge, a knowledge of stereotypes and myths” (p. 4). Therefore, curriculum affects identity development because it does little to address partial knowledges; in fact the hidden curriculum “sanctions the partial and oppressive knowledges already in schools and society” (p. 5).

Mackey (1999) begins the *The House of Difference* with the suggestion that national identity is shaped “through representations, institutions, and policies” (p. 6). The development and perpetuation of Canada’s multicultural identity is successful because “others” are necessary for this claimed multicultural, diverse, mosaic identity. Susan Dion (2009) explains that unfortunately, Canadians do not fully acknowledge that the racism that fuelled colonization sprang from a system that benefits all non-Aboriginal people, not just the European settlers of long ago. This refusal to know is comforting: it supports an understanding of racism as an act of individuals, not a system. It creates a barrier allowing Canadians to resist confronting the country’s racist past and the extent to which the past lives inside its present, deep in the national psyche. (p. 56-57)

Therefore teachers must incorporate “ways of engaging with and speaking to the legacy of three hundred years of oppression, the ongoing inequitable distribution of power and resources, and the relations that sustain those inequities” (p. 76). The national identity perpetuates the status quo and silences the oppressed. Therefore, identity is shaped by history, power, politics, education, and dominant majorities, all of which are systems of power, within society, that continually reproduce inequitable power distributions. The
damage and assimilation are irreversible. But when an educational community of teachers and learners understand how events of the past impact current conditions, the community can “use that understanding to begin to take active steps toward accomplishing justice by participating in new forms of interaction that honour the dignity of the Other” (p. 77). Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV (1995) do not deem a teacher’s cultural background as a determinant for effective culturally responsive teaching because to do so creates more excuses for why it is not being done. English Language Arts classrooms have contributed to oppression, but ELA can be used as a medium for anti-oppressive education.

2.4 Awakening to Defy Passivity and Apathy

Anti-oppressive pedagogy may create opportunities for awareness with students. Through anti-oppressive strategies, students may awaken from passivity and apathy and become engaged in an anti-oppressive movement through education.

2.4.1 Anti-Oppressive Education is Needed - The Response this Pedagogy Provides

Oppression in education exists; thus, having knowledge of how the society works in racialized and oppressive ways is the foundation for anti-oppressive pedagogy. I believe that change must move through pedagogy to make a social justice stance, and then moving into anti-oppressive pedagogy affecting change. McKinley, Brayboy, and McCarty’s (2010) definition of social justice pedagogy is “the process of engaging in and creating a social-educational system that allows us to move toward equity and fairness for all” (p. 192). The definitions of social justice pedagogy vary within the field. For instance, Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) explain
that social justice education can play a constructive role in helping people develop
a more sophisticated understanding of diversity and social group interaction, more
critically evaluate oppressive social patterns and institutions, and work more
democratically with diverse others to create just and inclusive practices and social
structures. (p. xvii)

Social justice education recognizes oppression and aims for inclusion; whereas anti-
oppressive pedagogy goes a step beyond. After developing skills to critically recognize
these patterns of oppression, the anti-oppressive approach I have taken is to de-center
white racial, Christian, male privilege and normative knowledge within our classrooms. I
believe the distinction between social justice and anti-oppressive pedagogy is clear in
Freire’s (1997) explanation of generosity and false charity;

[f]alse charity constrains the fearful and the subdued, the ‘rejects of life,” to
extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands
– whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in
supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and,
working, transform the world. (p. 27)

Anti-oppressive pedagogy is the humanistic task – to regain humanity for all – to liberate
the oppressed and the oppressors – to create a new way of knowing (p. 26).

St. Denis (2011) believes a new way of knowing can be accomplished and that
teachers need to get away from the “fluff” and make it “real.” In researching an ELA
classroom, Willinsky (2000) explains one way of challenging established conventions of
English methods is by teaching students how literature can be a force in the world. We
can use it for anti-oppressive education with this paradigm shift, but it has been used to
“justify the conquering spirit of an imperial power” (p. 5). If we are going to influence a paradigm shift and create an ironic outcome, by using English as the foundation for anti-oppressive education, many changes must be made. For instance, “this may involve non-Aboriginal teachers honestly acknowledging the ways in which Canada has oppressed Aboriginal people in the past” (St. Denis, 2011, p. 15). An Indigenous framework is an approach that can be used to de-centre the white privilege approaches that are too often the central approach.

The introduction of Kovach’s Indigenous Methodologies (2009) is a valuable piece that emphasizes the importance of community. In this approach, along with accountability and relationships, Kovach again stresses the respect of and for the people with whom research is being conducted. Furthermore, Indigenous methodologies continue to be more of an inclusive approach because “many non-Indigenous young people are attracted to Indigenous approaches as well because I believe, it has to do with a generation seeking ways to understand the world without harming it” (Kovach, 2009, p. 11). The hope that Kovach exudes, has motivated me. Kovach focuses on the “experiences in integrating cultural knowledge into methodology” (p. 39) and how complex this type of qualitative approach is to create research of quality and integrity.

The norm or dominant system has been Western education and European epistemological thought. The norm in academic research has been a reproduction of Western ideologies. McIvor (2010) points out that the identity of Canada is “completely contrived and based on colonial aims of extinguishing Indians altogether. The system is highly flawed and is so many generations deep now that it is difficult to rectify” (p. 145); but it is not impossible. Therefore, an Indigenous framework begins to break the boundaries that have
been created by colonialism.

Kovach writes about the use of story aiding in the process of breaking down boundaries. She suggests that we, as researchers, have the “ability to craft [our] own research stories, in [our own] voice . . . to engage others” (p. 60) to heighten awareness. Using these findings is part of a power dynamic that comes with being a part of academia; the story I tell with the findings becomes the methodology that “encompasses both knowledge systems and methods, the purpose of an Indigenous framework is to illustrate the unification of these aspects” (p. 42). It is challenging work, but I believe it can lead to change. I believe that one first has to understand him/herself prior to accomplishing heightened awareness of others. This is the foundation of my anti-oppressive approach, hence the focus on autobiography that I chose for this research. Without this, “an analysis for making visible the power dynamics within society, as well as developing the tools to think, write, and be in a way of that furthers social justice” (p. 92) will not be possible. More important than storytelling is “situating self, culture, and purpose” (p.109) within those stories. Kovach (2009) supports a methodology that can share knowledge without “exploiting community or familial knowledge” (p.148).

Anti-oppressive teaching does not mean that the Ministry of Education’s curriculum document is ignored or that one needs to recreate everything. It can be far less daunting than that. Kumashiro (2009) has influenced the notion I follow in my classroom on my anti-oppressive journey remembering always that teaching towards social justice does not mean teaching the “better” curriculum or the better story; rather, it means teaching students to think independently, critically, and creatively about whatever story is being taught whether that is the
dominant narrative or any number of alternative perspectives from the margins.

(p. xxv)

I do not mean to suggest this work is easy. It is ironic work in that often times the uncomfortable and difficult moments are the moments where in fact, goals of anti-oppressive education have been met. If the classroom is comfortable and familiar, often times this can suggest that it is also oppressive. In fact, “[t]he norms of schooling, like the norms of society, privilege and benefit some groups and identities while marginalizing and subordinating others on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, language, age, and other social markers” (p. xxxv). Therefore, teaching students critical literacy skills will allow them to begin to recognize what society deems as normative possibly resulting in the disruption of these norms operating within our classrooms.

2.5 A Movement Toward Anti-Oppressive ELA

Using a language focus is important in giving students the language to recreate the world. This strategy may support anti-oppressive ELA in becoming the norm. Lenora Cook (1996) writes about the different voices in English classrooms. Her work proposes a starting point to begin the movement from oppressive ELA tendencies towards anti-oppressive education and creating rich language environments. To do this, Cook suggests that three strands are needed in the approach. To honor diversity in the classroom, a teacher must know the following:

Hear Every Voice, the language strand, encourages peer appreciation of dialect and language diversity; Preserving Voices, the composition strand, emphasizes the bond between writer and audience that leads to understanding self and others;
and Affirming Voices, the literature strand, expands upon and enriches the traditional canon by dealing with literary selections that reflect the experiences of diverse groups. (p. xi-xiii)

Literacy and English mandated curricula have been created and implemented as if the students were a homogeneous group, an approach that has disenfranchised students and has made them subjects to language and racial prejudices. Therefore, the writing of an autobiographical narrative provides students with “opportunities to present their awareness of the social and political realities in their lives, their sorrows, frustrations, and anger” (p. 77). Students can begin to use their language background and “native knowledge of languages other than English [to] provide a special opportunity in the study of literature as well as in writing” (p. 103). This acknowledgement may support educators who are moving away from normative/oppressive language teaching, to critical literacy and a pedagogy of social change.

Contemporary urban classrooms, where students spend much of their time, are typically ethnically mixed environments. Alison Jones (1999) suggests that classrooms “provide an ideal space for the production and discipline of the modern social ideals of racial equality and dialogue” (p. 299). She suggests that the classroom can be a rich environment to talk and work across difference – both of power and ethnicity. Crossing these boundaries within a classroom could be “central to the development of a multivoiced and equitable culturally diverse society” (p. 299). This goal does not come without challenges; Jones discusses cross-cultural dialogue in similar ways to Weis and Fine (2001) who write about how dialogue can lead to “extraordinary conversations” if there are shared goals among all students involved. The culmination of cross-cultural
dialogue and opportunities for extraordinary conversations can lead to breaking down the barriers of oppression. Even if there is a mutual empathy, it does not mean talking across difference will be comfortable or easy. Students and teacher will learn from each other. But first, I believe there needs to be a common set of language or vocabulary that can be utilized within this dialogue.

The language set could create a shared understanding that is at the core of the class, which creates a common ground. Bruce Parker (2009) writes about the importance of critical conversations about social class. Of relevance here is his focus on the need for a specific vocabulary in order for students to have these critical conversations. He writes, "[w]ithout this vocabulary, individuals are ill-equipped to engage in the type of complicated conversation that is needed to understand the elusive natures of social class in their own lives and in the world around them” (p. 3). I believe a vocabulary is needed to address not only social class, but other areas of oppression including: race, sex, and religion. Anti-oppressive pedagogy must create a space where there is openness to others and their stories. Communication, accessibility to new discourses, multiple engagements, and serious as well as joyful opportunities for sharing can inform students and heighten their awareness of oppression and privilege (Jones, 1999, p. 305). She reemphasizes her point of significance that while crossing the “rocky terrains and borders of difference, and into the centers of power, is not the telling, but the hearing of stories. Most important in educational dialogue is not the speaking voice, but the voice heard” (p. 307).

2.5.1 Critical Literacy in Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

Critical literacy skills are at the foundation of this anti-oppressive pedagogical approach. Critical literacy skills can provide students with a new way to “be” in this
world, and it is a way of comprehending and critically thinking about how systems of privilege operate in society. An ability to live as one, meaning not allowing social norms to oppress others or ourselves, can be accomplished through language education that prioritizes and recognizes differences, instead of the focus on hegemonic-oppressive practices we are still seeing today. Freire’s (1997) reading the word and the world is the foundation for an effective critical literacy approach in anti-oppressive pedagogy.

Patrick Camangian (2010) writes

[r]e-naming the world requires that students learn to become critically conscious of how they construct their realities with the words they use to describe it . . .

Reading the word and the world, moreover, enables students to make sense of the harsh realities shaping much of their lived experience. . . Critical literacy happens as students are guided to interrogate their multiple identities, the social conditions that define their worldviews, and communicate transformative readings of the word and the world. (p. 181)

When students employ critical literacy skills in their reading, writing, listening, and speaking, viewing and representing they begin to unravel the oppressive norms within education.

Literacy education goes beyond teaching of the six language strands that are the foundation of the Saskatchewan (and most Western) ELA curricula: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing. In fact, Kynard and Eddy (2009) write about critical literacy education addressing “the white-middle-class-bounded nature of what counts as literacy, language, and writing (and thereby, being human)” (p. 5). If the oppressive norms in ELA classrooms are to be derailed, “our students’ skillful
deployment of their trans-school literacies is part of how they make sense of the world and can provide unique opportunities in which to understand, critique, and re-negotiate the hostile nature of schooling (p. 5). Tuman (1998) suggests that texts studied within ELA classes can introduce new and alternative ways to understanding one’s self and the world. Teaching critical literacy skills can shift an ELA classroom from being oppressive to liberating.

Tuman (1998) suggests that texts studied within ELA classes can introduce new and alternative ways to understanding one’s self and the world. Teaching critical literacy skills can shift an ELA classroom from being oppressive to liberating.

Curriculum is an organization of someone’s knowledge. Connell (1993) suggests that curricula advance particular social interests. Therefore, I believe when any knowledge is privileged, undoubtedly, someone becomes oppressed. Teachers and students can apply their critical literacy skills to acknowledge the imbalance of privilege. Tuman (1998) writes about one “key is freeing the discourse from traditional sources of authority – institutions of wealth, power, and status – ostensibly in the name of enhancing the standing of those not well served by the status quo” (p. 162). The ELA curriculum will always present issues of social power relations and biases. The suggested reading lists tend to be problematic as well. It is not a question of whether or not we are going to teach literature in ELA, but more importantly what literature we choose to teach and how. Ernest Morrell (2008) writes that the need becomes finding “methods of approaching literature that are more constant with the goals of critical literacy education” (p. 84). Approaching literature in this way would include revealing multiple ways that texts create meaning and shape human identities; call the authority of the author or text into question; position the reader in different relations to the text to negate passivity and empower students to read against the text; critique social structures and cultural practices; this can help students come to know themselves better; students can engage in
discussions about relations between texts and ideals and values of dominant society; ultimately leading students to awakening to a better understand of their own humanity (Morrell, 2008).

There are several approaches to literacy education, but I have employed a critical framework which supports an emancipatory pedagogy. If literacy educators can analyze and interrogate their pedagogical practices, maybe a change in English Language Arts education is possible. Sometimes differences are the only things we have in common with others and so it is important to understand how our identity is shaped by ways of knowing. Dion (2007) emphasizes questioning what purposes our ways of knowing serve.

2.6 Creating a Sense of Urgency to Close the Gap of Oppression

I have discussed relevant research within my literature review that addresses the burning questions of my study. I believe that if we, students and teachers, cannot name oppressive issues, we will not be able to address them; therefore, education will continue to produce and reproduce oppression. R.W. Connell (1993) says that education systems perpetuate current social assets, therefore directly shaping society. He writes, “[i]f the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality of education for all the others is degraded” (p. 15). Through ELA, how will I empower myself and the students to defy passivity and apathy because oppression in education exists; can the engagement and sense of urgency in an anti-oppressive ELA class create a movement of social awareness? Weis and Fine (2001) discuss the benefits of disruptive pedagogies. Their argument advocates for considering a broader spectrum of context and understanding of power relationships among students,
teachers, and communities. Classrooms have been spaces where hegemonic moments have been challenged, disrupted, and may have affected social consciousness and community. Much work is aimed at uncovering and theorizing how schools reproduce and legitimize social inequalities. There are spaces within educational institutions where there is hope for peace, collective, communal, and transformative work. Weis and Fine (2001) suggest that (re)educative work can flourish in these spaces. Several ways in which this reeducating can take place is first through “counterpublics” which oppose stereotypes to affect shifting identities and therefore student interpretations of literature. Second, is challenging the norm or “common sense” about themselves (students) or others – counterhegemonic. A counterpublic space can be created to address inequality issues of social class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on.

Furthermore, if this space is to exist within educational sites, adults must establish and then facilitate teens actively opposing, challenging, disrupting, and interacting. This is uncomfortable space, and often times teachers do not allow classes to “go there.” This is what Weis and Fine (2001) called “bottom line” space in which sensitive issues can be shared. Often times, these moments get cut off by the teacher, because they are uncomfortable. Therefore, teachers remove the opportunity for group-based resistance, transformation, or emancipatory education opportunities (p. 507). Closing the gap between the oppressed and the privilege is a goal of this anti-oppressive research.

The invisible walls of segregation can be broken down by the facilitating discussion about those who have been historically silenced, to melt the boundaries, and partially restore humanity. Continuing the discussion on creating these spaces, it is important for teachers to question power and privilege and this engages (and enrages)
students. Encouraging the altering of power relations in a school can be accomplished creating opportunities for “social critique, new alliances, and alternative readings of common sense are available, nurtured, and supported by and among youth” (p. 521). Weis and Fine’s theoretical perspectives are valuable to this study because they provide ideas that the professional teacher can adapt into practice. There is not enough of this type of work being done or written about, therefore widening the gap between theory and effective practice. I find it very important to highlight the moments when teachers and students “work against the grain to create more critical and egalitarian structures” (p. 498). Weis and Fine acknowledge the ongoing attempt of fatigued teachers, who still, every day, stand in front of their students trying to create a space “in which a view from the bottom, a moment of empathy, a peek from another angle, a reanalysis of youth’s assumptions could enter” (p. 512). I believe that racially aware teachers are committed to accomplishing this every day. However, even with committed and knowledgeable attempts, we do not succeed often enough at creating these spaces for extraordinary conversations.

Anti-oppressive education should not be understood as an extra unit of study or an additional work load; Connell (1993) suggests “the issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about” (p. 15). So I am brought back to the questions that drive this work forward.

In this chapter I claim that without being able to name oppressive issues, how can educators and students address them. Furthermore, how will educators empower themselves and others to awaken to oppression and defy passivity and apathy that maintains oppressive norms? Through employing anti-oppressive education that names
oppressive issues, will students be motivated or engaged to actively close a gap, chipping away at these oppressive boundaries that continue to separate humanity, to create a sense of urgency, in order to create a social awareness and change? In the next chapter I will present my methodologies and explain what I chose to do in response to my burning questions.
3. METHODOLOGY: WHAT I CHOSE TO DO IN RESPONSE TO MY BURNING QUESTIONS

This is a qualitative study informed by narrative and Indigenous methodologies. I developed an anti-oppressive pedagogy for a grade eleven ELA class by threading together stories, critical literacy skills, and autobiography. Along the journey we studied stories and took risks to heighten our awareness of oppression.

3.1 Narrative Research

Narrative research celebrates the identity of an individual or group of individuals. According to Creswell (2010), the term narrative research is an overarching category for a variety of practices: autobiographies, biographies, life histories, personal narratives, oral histories, and personal accounts. The stories are collected from individuals and the researcher must restory them into a framework that may include factors from the setting, personal experiences, the choices or actions, and resolutions. For this study, I have focused on participants’ experiences with regard to changes they may have had in racial attitudes and oppressive beliefs.

The inclusion of students’ voices commonly absent in the study of pedagogy is critical and essential to this study. I will use narrative research methods within an Indigenous methodology to represent stories and voices from a sample group of students, because they often do not have a voice within academic research. I believe what I have chosen to do and the methods used to generate the data are appropriate responses to the questions my research attempts to answer through the naming of oppression, a critical awakening, and creating urgency in closing the gap of oppression.
The narrative research process captures the unique features of each story. It centralizes the relationship between the individual and the wider structures of society that we take for granted - structures such as practices or cultural features of our everyday world (Creswell, 2010). A narrative approach tells our story in the way we live. Onowa McIvor (2010) suggests that researchers need to place themselves within their research and place their work firmly in a relational context. However, narrative research helps call into question how the narratives of the dominant do not match the experiences of all persons (Creswell, 2010; Moen, 2006; Richmond, 2002). Narrative researchers can create opportunities that provide an account of those persons whose lives and histories go unheard or unseen. Specifically in education, it is a viable process to study individual experiences of teachers, students, or anyone else in the educational setting. In a broad sense, narrative research can also be used to study self, subjectivity, and the influence of culture on identity of an individual or group of individuals.

Historically, education as an institution has functioned to solidify social roles and reinforce class systems (Gallagher, 2003; Goodman, 2001; Grande, 2004; Freire, 1997; Leonardo, 2004; St. Denis, 2011). Pennycook (1989) emphasizes that “knowledge is produced within a particular configuration of social, cultural, economic, political, and historical circumstances and therefore always reflects and helps to (re)produce those conditions” (p. 595). Furthermore, a racial hierarchy exists within schools and society, which places whiteness at the top (Leonardo, 2009; Sterzuk, 2011). Currently, education continues to maintain the systems of the dominant and the oppressed groups. In order to address oppression in education I decided not to follow a singular research methodology, such as Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative inquiry approach. According to
Creswell (2010), narrative’s methods are still developing, and there is little agreement about its form. It has, however, been embraced by all human sciences, and each discipline has developed specific procedures.

Creswell (2010) outlines for his readers that narrative research seeks to understand and represent experiences addressing an educational problem; next the narrative researcher selects individuals to participate in the study to further learn about the educational problem; once permission has been granted to the researcher, the individuals’ stories are collected, in this study through autobiography; then the researcher must restory the personal experiences addressing the research questions. In summary, this is a qualitative study drawing on narrative theory and Indigenous methodologies. Therefore, I have chosen the narrative approach supported by Indigenous methodologies for my research to promote and open “possibilities for compassion, kindness, and greater levels of understanding” (p.142) as advocated by the Indigenous approach in anti-oppressive pedagogy.

3.2 Indigenous Methodology

Shawn Wilson (2007) believes that an Indigenous paradigm may be used by anyone and stresses that it does not only belong to Aboriginal people (p. 194). The purpose for using Indigenous methodology is to further create Indigenous understanding and promoting its use and advocating for its legitimacy as a way of knowing. It is the philosophy behind the search for knowledge that creates an Indigenous methodology, not the racial identity of the researcher (p.194). Also, it is common for additional paradigms to be used in conjunction with an Indigenous paradigm. Indigenous methodologies work well in a combined approach and McIvor (2010) explains that narrative is one of these
approaches (p. 140). A shared goal of narrative and Indigenous frameworks is that “creating new knowledge is part of the aim of scholarly work” (p. 149). These two methodologies share an important challenge in that both narrative and the Indigenist paradigms face the issue of “acceptance as legitimate science in the academy” (p. 148). For both, storytelling is the primary method in supporting the research questions and goals.

As a researcher, I am seeking to understand and represent experiences of my high school students. Teenagers are a unique group of people who are beautifully dynamic; therefore, I knew a singular approach may not capture all of the dynamics I wanted to spotlight. McIvor (2010) explains that Indigenous methodologies have an “underlying foundation of self-determination and commitment to decolonizing as a process and movement” (p.139). Effective Indigenous research occurs when we connect to all that is around us, conduct ourselves with kindness and honesty, bring benefit to the community, and know that transformation will be one of the outcomes (p.139). This transformation can be seen as a heightened level of conscious about oppressive systems which may lead students from apathy to engagement. Personal stories provide opportunities to connect with those around us, which provides an example of the complimentary components of narrative and Indigenous methodologies.

In terms of narrative, one of the interesting aspects of my story of coming to the research questions is my struggle with whether or not to use Indigenous methods because I am white. Wilson (2007) outlines other key components which are essential in participating in Indigenous methodologies including:
researchers and authors need to place themselves and their work firmly in a relational context. We cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separate from ourselves (ie., we must write in first person rather than the third). Our own relationships with our environment, families, ancestors, ideas, and the cosmos around us shape who we are and how we will conduct our research.

(p.194)

Other guiding principles which guide Indigenous methodologies suggest that we:

[c]onduct all actions and interactions in a spirit of kindness, honesty, and compassion . . . the methods used will be process-oriented . . . It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes . . . It is advisable that a researcher work as part of a team of Indigenous scholars/thinkers. (p.195)

Researchers who work in this paradigm continue to further develop its definition as transformations continue to take place. This is all in an attempt to address the stark issues of oppression and may begin a new journey of the possibility of truly anti-oppressive education. Being a shared journey, it embraces both narrative and Indigenist paradigms that aim to “connect to spirit, our own and others, while making space for the creation of new knowledge and further inclusion” (McIvor, 2010, p. 149). In order for the study to be faithful to this goal, the framework has to parallel its attempted goals.

3.3 Pedagogy and Autobiography

First, white teachers must comprehend white racial knowledge to be able to use anti-oppressive pedagogy. The same applies to students. Second, self-awareness must be heightened first for teachers and then for students before anti-oppressive education can be
effective. Finally, discussions about race need to become part of the classroom discourse to advance the cause of anti-oppressive pedagogy and ultimately, transformation. Often times, the lack of race discussions are continuing the cycle of silence surrounding the racialized norm of whiteness. Nevertheless, by using an anti-oppressive approach, a teacher can facilitate educational awareness and mediate the effects of power systems within the curricular context; if and when, critical awareness and critique are conducted by the teacher and then facilitated effectively with the class, the students can be stirred from apathy to engagement to have urgency in participating in closing the gap between the oppressors and the oppressed.

In Saskatchewan, English Language Arts 20 (ELA 20) is the only required English course for students at the grade eleven level. The themes of this course, in combination with the stage of the development of the students typically enrolled in the course, provide students with opportunities for deep thought on many important issues and concepts. As with all of the renewed curricula, the course must address “Broad Areas of Learning that reflect Saskatchewan’s Goals of Education. K-12 English Language Arts contributes to the Goals of Education through helping students achieve knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (2010 Saskatchewan Curriculum: English Language Arts, 2010, p. 3). Many of these ELA goals include:

- positive self-concept and the ability to live in harmony with others and with the natural and constructed worlds. Achieving this competency requires understanding, valuing, and caring for oneself and for others, and understanding and valuing social and environmental interdependence and sustainability. English language arts requires students to explore ideas and issues of identity, community, social responsibility,
diversity, and sustainability. Students study texts and ideas about personal and philosophical; social, historical, and cultural topics . . Social responsibility is how people positively contribute to their physical, social, and cultural environments. It requires the ability to participate with others in accomplishing goals. This competency is achieved through using moral reasoning processes, engaging in communitarian thinking and dialogue, and taking action. Socially responsible learners contribute to their physical, social, and cultural environments. (p.4)

Anti-oppressive education can be achieved when students are provided with the language and skills needed to construct meaning from literature and apply it to their worlds, their lives, and their stories. As Glasgow (2001) states, “[i]f we expect students to take social responsibility, they must explore ideas, topics, and viewpoints that not only reinforce but challenge their own” (p. 54). To adopt anti-oppressive pedagogy, educators must address how oppression is “characterized and fueled by negative associations with difference, such as race, ethnicity, class gender, and sexuality” (Walton, 2005, p.7). One of the aims of this study is to recognize that white privilege becomes problematic in anti-oppressive pedagogy because whites “do not think of their life choices in racial ways, and do not consider themselves as belonging to a racial group” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 231).

Unfortunately, many whites do not understand that their experiences are part of a system that provides white privilege. White ignorance is also known as being “color-blind” (p. 231). White educators must become fully aware of our decision making, pedagogy, and all race relations to create anti-oppressive pedagogy, because “whites have had the luxury of neglecting their own development in racial understanding, which should not be confused with racial knowledge” (p. 231). I am suggesting that white teachers must be
more vigilant about interrogating practice because they are on the powerful side of the hierarchy. On different levels, teachers “recognize the importance of both gender- and class-based analyses while at the same time pointing to their short comings vis-a-vis race” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 49); therefore, their work justifies the need for further research to be conducted in the field of anti-oppressive pedagogy. Several key areas must be addressed.

In the autobiographies students wrote as part of this study, they were encouraged to include personal anecdotes as well as documentation of any changes they perceived as they engaged in the recollection and reflection on their attitudes and experiences. They were asked to consider their evolving attitudes toward issues of inequity prior to exposure to a foundation of anti-oppressive ELA, building toward a more in depth understanding or heightened awareness over the semester. A close reading of the autobiographies confirmed for me that the autobiography assignment provided an opportunity to challenge assumptions, introduce new ways of thinking, consider identity construction, tell one’s story, and then personally reflect on one’s self (Mulholland & Longman, 2009, p. 207). The student autobiographies are the primary source to interpret. Interpretation of relationality is a significant aspect of the methodology. The theory of autobiography is a critical element in search for meaning of the human experience, identity development, and the disrupting and dismantling of the politics of race, class, and gender, which have influenced an interest and need for theories of autobiography (Berryman, 1999; Brady, 1990). Furthermore, Nado Aveling (2001) suggests that reflecting on the ways in which experiences have shaped us is important. Therefore, the “context of autobiographical narrative does not function as a form of psychotherapy but rather as a political,
intellectual project devoted to transformation” (p. 41). Demonstrating that the use of autobiography is valuable, deconstructing the self to question assumptions, hegemony, cultural norms, racism, social problems, and mainstream society is possible. Aveling illustrates ways that autobiography can be used to explore issues related to identity as well as curricular matters using anti-oppressive education. By inviting students to become critical of self, autobiography can produce moments of insight (p. 42). These moments of insight often lead to transformation which is a shared goal of narrative and Indigenous methodologies. A written educational exercise such as an autobiography allows students to reflect on their own schooling and personal experiences. This is one example of how I applied my understanding of the methodologies to my praxis within the classroom.

The study explored how grade eleven students can read critically and analyze literature through an anti-oppressive lens to recognize power relationships of inequity in society and our own lives. Once the students had acquired the knowledge and tools to recognize these power structures, the conversations then lead to social justice issues. Specifically, this research examines how students understand, discuss, and apply concepts of inequity beyond literature to their personal recollections of experiences and growth through writing an autobiography. The autobiographies of the students who consented to participate in the study are the stories which have been used in this shared collective story, this narrative.

Recollections followed by reflections on childhood memories are important learning experiences for students. Kate Rousmaniere (2000) states “that the experiences of childhood carry through adulthood, that there is a connection between our first experiences and our later responses” (p. 88). She encourages the use of an
educational autobiography assignment. This semi-structured writing exercise gives students the opportunity to understand personally how their own education developed through a combination of their own individual life circumstances, personality and family, with dominant social conditions of their gender, race, and class. (p. 88)

Recognizing “the students’ and teachers’ biographical, historical and social situations that they bring into the classroom” (p. 89) provides opportunities for culturally-responsive literacy teaching, and has potential for doing anti-oppressive education.

Similarly, Lee Anne Bell (2003) believes “stories enable people who have been oppressed to name and reclaim . . . the dynamics we are told do not exist” (p. 6). I wanted to avoid presenting hegemonic stories of only dominant groups within my ELA classes. Hegemonic stories are texts which are blind to the oppressors’ influence and power. Anti-oppressive pedagogy moves toward un-blinding our, teachers’ and students’, racist selves. Therefore, recognizing racism and white privilege is equally important to white students as it is to non-white students. Ideas for change must “develop appropriate strategies to address racism with White people at different levels of consciousness” (p. 23). Bell believes that stories, both literature and our own stories, can “be a potential tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society” (p. 4). Therefore, I used autobiography as a tool for developing awareness.

Throughout the process telling and representing the collective story, I had to question whether this anti-oppressive approach had an ability to create a heightened awareness of systems of power, thus reflecting a truly anti-oppressive education for the students. With this research the autobiographies - life histories and personal narratives
written by students - were read and re-read by me, and organized into themes. These stories were collected from the students and I retold the story reflecting on our recollected journey. What follows is an explanation of how I analyzed the data.

3.4 Along the Journey:

I taught one ELA 20 class (grade 11) a thematic unit called “Recollections- A Journey Back” with an anti-oppressive approach which was comprised of a study of literature, in tandem with an exploration of concepts of culture, racial knowledge, history, curriculum, self-awareness, and personal reflection. Following the intensive unit of study, students were assigned a culminating writing assignment, an autobiography (see Appendix A) which became the source of data of the study. The assignment required students to reflect on their racial identities and how their socially constructed identities impact the way they see, experience, and interact with the world. Over the course of the unit, they engaged in structured reflections through writing and whole class discussion. In this reflective process, one I have called recollections, they articulated any struggles, epiphanies, growth, enlightenment, changes of attitudes, hardening of attitudes, or any thoughts on their racial attitudes and identities that have been developed and shaped from their childhood, social, and educational experiences. These recollections formed the basis for the individual autobiographies.

Weis and Fine (2001) discuss the standpoint theory which explains that an idea from “the bottom” rather than from the top may be just as “good” or as “smart” as one from the top. Often times the voice of the marginalized or the voice from the bottom is missing in academic theorizing. Not often enough are these voices given the opportunity to be shared or heard. This happens because students “think, feel, see, express, resist,
comply, and are silent in accordance with their social power and that a view from the ‘bottom’ may diverge dramatically, critically, and brilliantly from the ‘top’” (p. 513). In being disruptive or having extraordinary conversations it is important to be aware that “it seems likely that students of color are ‘stuck’ until ‘race’ is discussed, while White students are ‘stuck’ once race is discussed” (p. 515). I also believe that if a conversation is uncomfortable, it is important. The discourses within the room will change and this may provide a unique opportunity for an extraordinary conversation. Then the teacher and students can reflect on what was gained, challenged, or learned.

Weis and Fine (2001) present such an optimistic and hopeful approach to teaching across differences for the purpose of altering power and ridding oppression. I tend to engage and “buy into” ideas similar to these because they provide a starting point of optimism in addressing my burning questions that drive my research. Weis and Fine state, “together and separately, young people and shaping identities that do and do not resist the structures around them; that will and will not transform their material conditions” (p. 499) can possibly lead to re-imagining social possibilities. It seems to me, that our anti-oppressive pedagogical attempts lay in and amongst these parodies of hope.

I perceive a large gap between theory and practice, as I stated earlier, and it is refreshing to see pedagogy that is working across differences (Weis & Fine, 2001; Jones, 1999). Unfortunately, these are extraordinary conversations in that they do not take place often enough, effectively enough, or safely enough to affect change. Therefore, the construction of otherness is confirmed by having cultural differences within a school, if these anti-oppressive spaces are not created for and with students. Conversations amongst educators and students may be a starting point to ultimately be able to facilitate
extraordinary conversations within our educational spaces. The notions of colorblindness (Gallagher, 2010), limited alliances across difference (St. Denis, 2007), or the pastoral educator (Cavanagh, 2001) are important to note. Any aspect of otherness with an individual, the community, the education system, and society as a whole can potentially be a space where oppression exists if there is lack of knowledge and awareness. A lack of social awareness ultimately can lead to oppressing, creating, maintaining, or perpetuating the other. These conversations may allow movement from being othered or in the margins, to shifting the norm or the powers that sit in the centre. Giving a voice is the first step. But, if that voice is not heard, no change will occur. Weis and Fine (2001) say it best in that “we yearn to understand how we can nurture, cultivate, fertilize our rooms so that critical turns get a voice, and eventually get a hearing” (p. 514). When we see the dominant powers within in a space cracking, we cannot stop the conversations. They will become freeing only when they surpass the point of comfort. We are left with hope that if the conditions of our classrooms become agitated enough, we may effectively build an alliance with a peer who is very different. Weis and Fine refer to these as contact zones which can lead to community and social justice.

I then had to take the knowledge that I had acquired through reading and studying anti-oppressive education, in concern with Narrative and Indigenous methodologies, and decide how I was going to turn theory into practice. Understanding where one “fits” on the societal spectrum of marginalized to dominant positioning is one of the first steps in consciousness-raising. Self-critique is needed before external changes can be made. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also explain the need for a radical critique of the status quo and societal norms they are not to be perpetuated and continually reconstructed.
within education (p. 62). Delpit (1988) supports this stance in that she believes that teachers must support students to recognize and then understand the implicit and explicit rules of power. The development of this critical lens is the beginning of a true anti-oppressive pedagogy. English education can be used as a vehicle to heighten awareness rather than to oppress. As an anti-oppressive ELA teacher, I have also been influenced by Cherland (2000) as she explains the need to “engage young people in reconsidering and deconstructing texts, so that multiple meanings for them emerge” (p. 106). Yet, it is necessary but not sufficient for students to only understand that the social world shapes our readings and our identities. Nor is it enough to make the teenage readers the only reference point or the undisputed centre of their knowledge. The next step in this process must be to provide opportunities to our students which explore ways of reading literature that go further and beyond examining their personal responses (p. 105). In my class, we call this a relating reading strategy. How do I relate to the text? Students relate to the text with an affirmative or negative response in three different levels – text to self, text to text, and text to the world. When we arrive at the third response, we learn significantly about each person’s sense of identity or self. More importantly, we see concrete examples of how identity and subjectivity are constructed by different cultural discourses each student embodies (p. 106). Seeing alternative discourses to ours is not easily accomplished, but before we were able to look inward, we were able to practice with literature. Examining discourses in novels and stories is a starting point teachers can use in their classes. It is valuable to be aware of how we react to literature, but this is not enough. In fact, “understanding the self, understanding how one’s identity is formed, must also involve looking outward at the world” (p. 110). It is difficult and extremely frightening work, as I
attempted to reduce my role in reproducing oppression in my classroom. Every decision I made, I did so in “conducting [my]self with kindness, honesty, and compassion” (McIvor, 2010, p. 139) so at least that was the underlying foundation in case I made a mistake; the chances of me making a mistake were extremely daunting. This was messy work. There was no handbook that I deemed sufficient in leading me through our journey. Therefore, we were writing our own story in hopes that some goodness could come from it.

In the course of this particular research, the class studied several literary texts, of various genres, which I will discuss briefly.

3.4.1 Rabbit-Proof Fence

I used the 2002 Australian film, Rabbit-Proof Fence to convey to students the history of Indigenous peoples in colonized societies. The film depicts the stories of two biracial sisters who escape a residential school by walking across the continent to be reunited with their mother. In contrast to Canada where First Nations and not Métis children were incarcerated in residential schools, in Australia the reverse is true. The film is an effective approach to address how colonial societies are ingrained in present society. The film highlights white settlers’ lack of responsibility and lack of recognition regarding what was/is being done to Indigenous peoples. Settler societies like Canada and Australia were founded on principles of white settler domination, using the judicial and educational systems to establish the racial hierarchical norm (Sterzuk, 2011). In classrooms, the white settler ideology often times does not permeate the teacher or students’ consciousness – and this is a direct reflection of genealogy of white racial domination passed down through generations. In class, we completed a critical response to this text in an attempt
to heighten awareness of the way students see or do not see incidents of cultural genocide; after critique, discussion, and then reflecting, students completed a journal writing assignment. Writing, discussing, listening, viewing, representing, analyzing, and critiquing are fundamental in developing critical literacy processes throughout anti-oppressive education. In this reflective autobiographical journal entry, students explored their own critical contexts pertaining to the course components: literature, themes, concepts, and so on. The process works to connect individual responses to texts (in the literature, labelled text to self reading strategy) with larger cultural systems, such as education, religion, class, gender, and race (text to world). Students asked themselves not only what their responses/thoughts/questions about the text or experience reveal about them, as individuals, but also about the culture and discourses we all inhabit. The concept of unpacking (McIntosh, 1988) is a fundamental part of this type of anti-oppressive journaling.

**3.4.2 April Raintree**

A second text used in this way was Beatrice Culleton’s *April Raintree* a fictionalized memoir of two Métis sisters in foster care. The text has been popular among Saskatchewan English teachers for over twenty years, in part because its inclusion has been interpreted as fulfilling the provincial mandate to teach First Nation and Métis texts. Proportionately more First Nations children are placed in foster care than non-First Nations children in Saskatchewan, indeed in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). There are difficulties finding First Nations foster homes, partly because of the standards used by non-First Nations, middle-class staff to assess foster homes. Most adopted Frist Nations children go to non-First Nations homes, which results in the adopted losing not only their
families but also their culture (Albert, 1995). In the reading of this non-fictional text, students made a record of their initial responses, even to what may seem like very basic concepts. Then they broke down their response into the many layers. For example, they asked themselves where did my personal reaction come from? Why did I feel this way? Who/what taught me that? In whose interest was it to teach me that? Is that the only way to see it? What are some other possibilities? For example, many students were outraged when the girls were apprehended from their mothers and grandmothers. They were emotional because they had been taught by their parents that families stay together. Risk of apprehension was not a fear of the students’. Students used this exercise to aid them in writing their own autobiographies. While writing their autobiographies, students were expected to work through and reflect on their place in history and society, their relationship to their own cultures and other cultures, to the unit and its attendant themes, to course ideas/concepts, and to literature. Students organized their papers around themselves and their thoughts, recollections, and experiences that have developed them from childhood. Students reflected on thoughts of racial identities and how that impacts the way they see and interact with the world. Students applied their critical literacy skills to this type of literature and then reflected if it was effective in the deterioration of existing oppressive barriers.

3.4.3 The Glass Castle

A third text studied in this manner was The Glass Castle, a memoir which served as a vehicle to study the theme of “Recollections – A Journey Back” in ELA 20. This is one of the two main themes of the course. I used this theme to focus on self and society, exploring childhood to adolescent experiences, family and peer relationships, education,
race relations, privilege and oppression, triumphs, and defeats. With this literary work, students engaged in actively reflecting on systems of privilege. Students reflected, questioned, discussed and wrote about the “big picture” addressing questions such as, how does the way I think allow me to operate in society? Where is my place in society, due to my experiences, sex, race, or religion? How do my ideologies affect the way I think? Treat others? In the memoir, Jeannette is singled out by a professor for not understanding the plight of homeless people; instead of defending herself (as she grew up under these circumstances), she stays silent. Why does she do this? What are other situations where people “keep quiet”? Why are some voices silenced? I use this memoir as a counter story to *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

In the semester when I was collecting data, we were able to attend an event that enriched the literary texts we were studying: The Regina Alternative Measures Program (RAMP) Education Through Justice, Justice Through Education Youth and Elder Symposium on Wednesday, November 16th, 2011. It was a symposium which facilitated greater youth and elder interaction and promoted cross-cultural understanding in order to assist and combat negative stereotypes and further the development of self-esteem for today’s youth. My class had the opportunity to attend this day as an experience for students to recognize the importance of elders in community and to heighten awareness. I chose to incorporate this symposium into our course because it allowed me to interlace story, community, elders, growth, breaking down boundaries, and extraordinary conversations which exemplified the narrative and Indigenous methodologies I was using in my study. Throughout this process, I was always very transparent with the students.
about what I was trying to accomplish, and attempted to explain the logic and research behind every decision I made.

3.5 The Risks Involved

As an individual, I do not feel comfortable with ambiguity or uncertainty. In childhood we do not have control over experiences of this nature, so in my adult life I strive to maintain stability. When I set off on this journey, I had no idea how difficult and uncomfortable it was going to be. Everything about this study was out of my comfort zone. There are so many points of irony throughout this time, the primary example being that I would even engage in this type of anti-oppressive work; but surely the second, most emblematic example of irony, is organizing the study in the way I did. It was uncomfortable for me throughout. Not a single component of this work was within my comfort zone, much less control. Paradoxically, doing anti-oppressive work in ELA education is and always has been my passion. Why does my passion lie within the realm of uncertainty and ambiguity?

To begin, I have always designed and taught my classes using an anti-oppressive framework. I have been doing this for seven years. But, what distinguished this study from my previous practices was the manner in which I approached the work with the students. This was the first time I ever facilitated a course with transparent intention. I named my purpose to my students. Reflecting back, I wonder to myself why I did not consider doing a pre-study for a semester or two prior to conducting my research? Why did I not implement trial and error followed by reflection prior to conducting research on this work? Why did I think I could jump into messy work like this and expect that it would go smoothly, efficiently, or as I imagined? In retrospect, I realize I had put all of
the theory into practice; therefore, I realized that I was fulfilling my own expectations. At times, I placed some stressful expectations on myself. My research was very time sensitive, as I only had the participating class for one semester. I had five months to accomplish everything I had planned in my class and in my academic commitments. In the summer of 2011, I began working on my Research Ethics Board application. We submitted that in September and awaited consent. In the meantime, I got to work on planning and facilitating my ELA course with my grade eleven class. In conjunction with teaching full-time senior ELA and my extra-curricular responsibilities, I was taking one graduate studies class, and writing the proposal.

3.6 The Ethics Process

I submitted my Research Ethics Board (REB) application in September, 2011. The REB reviewed my ethics application and approved it as submitted. After I received REB consent, I had only completed the first of five levels of consent I needed to complete the study. Next, I took my proposal to my administration and was granted approval and support immediately. I then needed consent from the school division. Now, because I was conducting research within the classroom with my students, there were many additional formalities. After several long weeks, I received board approval.

Before I continue explaining the levels of consent I was in the process of receiving, I also have to share the other procedures I was going through. If everything went as planned, I would be finished collecting my data before the end of semester one 2012 because I wanted to write my thesis during semester two. I wanted to solely focus on my research. So, with my principal’s support, I applied for an educational leave for semester two. I received verbal consent for my educational leave from my school board.
the day I applied. Therefore, before I received REB consent, research consent from my board, or consent from any of the parents or students, I was granted an education leave. These months were difficult because I was filled with uncertainty and fear that something would not go as planned. I had this leave to complete my thesis, but what if I did not get consent from the students or their parents for them to participate? I could hardly complete my research without any data. I do not know why I had put myself in such jeopardy. I only knew that this work was important and timely. I trusted that I was on the right path and that everything would fall into place as needed.

Thankfully, everything did work out. I would never recommend to anyone else to put themselves under this type of pressure (because research is difficult enough as it is). So, when I finally received board approval to conduct my research and as soon as I did, I presented the final autobiography narrative assignment to the class. The entire semester students were aware of and were active in the anti-oppressive approach to ELA which I introduced to them. They also knew I was enrolled in graduate studies at the local university and they supported my efforts to continue my education. I explained how the semester was leading up to an opportunity for the students to share their stories and for their voices to be heard. I presented the entire study and invited my class to participate. During the time students were given to choose to submit their consent forms to a third party were the most crucial weeks of all. The students did not know that my university, my career, and my personal life were in their hands. I invited them to participate with no incentives. I realized for the first time, that everything leading up to their agreeing to participate or not, and the resulting anxiety for me, could have been for nothing. If my students and their parents did not give their consent to participate, I would have been left
with an unpaid leave of absence and no data for a study I proposed to complete while on leave. Concurrently, I was naïve, hopeful, and eager prior to this stage in the process as well as scared, humbled, and vulnerable. What was I going to do next semester if I did not have data to write my thesis? I was overwhelmed.

Nonetheless, I could not lose hope. I felt that if all else fails I would be working on a worthwhile project that held the potential to contribute to the social good, even if my individual plans were squashed. Ground-breaking education is happening in schools in neighboring communities as well as in classrooms down the hall from me. There are teachers and students who are having extraordinary conversations (Weis & Fine, 2001) every day and who are breaking away the oppressive barriers of society. Those teachers are the epitome of commitment. Those students are going to shake society awake. Those students are more influential than anyone might imagine, yet they have no power. Having no power does not allow them a platform to be heard. My work served as a very small platform for the students in my study. I wanted to tell their stories and share their insights. They are worthy of an attentive ear, to be the focus of my listening. In this work I wanted to emphasize hope. And, my hope was not diminished but fulfilled when I broke open a sealed envelope that held the signed consent letters from parents and my students who agreed to participate in my research. I took this as the first sign that my students were socially aware enough to choose to engage in moving from apathy to action.
4. FINDINGS

In this chapter I discuss the findings of my research study. I reflect on and reveal that students are able to discern and question social inequities. The goals of the study were to understand whether my teaching practice of intentionally breaking down the barriers created by social inequities and of teaching critical literacy skills to interrogate oppression in our society were effective with the students. The purpose for using the autobiography was to gain and acknowledge the students’ points of views, recognition, or interpretation of social inequities, examples of oppression, and their knowledge and insight. This study focused on student connections rather than measuring or observing the efficacy of my pedagogy. The dominant group cannot help (much less be the savior) for the oppressed to be freed. This would reiterate privilege and power and would not break down the barriers of oppression. If no one is being oppressed, only then, will there be no oppressor. Without the voices of the marginalized, (females, disabilities, visible minorities, the young, inner city students, etc.), “it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). Many emancipatory theories work with autobiography.

For the purpose of this research, reflection incorporates, for both the students and me, several components. Discourses of reflection incorporate several meanings. Such is true for the purpose of this study. Reflection includes a demonstration of self-consciousness, a specific, studied, and planned approach for the future, a discipline to become more aware, a way to access our authentic selves, and strategies to name and address oppression around us (Fendler, 2003). I understand that all knowledge is constructed, and that all experiences are mediated through the social realm. Research may
come with unintended consequences (Fendler, 2003). Therefore, I wanted to draw attention to my awareness and self-reflection during this entire process. Within this theoretical framework, understanding that all knowledge is produced through discourses, I needed to be critical of what knowledge I was producing for my students; just as I produced them, they produced me. Therefore, “our best intentions may be falling short of the mark. But if we are open to the possibility of vigilant critique, then at least we have a fighting chance of avoiding similar oversights the next time around” (p. 23), with hope still alive to affect change.

4.1 The Teenage Learner

It is important to discuss the characteristics of the adolescent learner, and how the context of this study differs from many of the other similar studies that focus on older learners (Asher, 2007; Fendler, 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Youdell, 2006). Teens are a demographic filled with energy, optimism, hope, and knowledge. That is why I went to them. Writing autobiographies as a teenager can be effective in producing new knowledge about how personal experiences have shaped perceptions, ideologies, and identity while also serving to validate and hear the personal voice of the writer (Fendler, 2003). Who students are and where they come from are very significant factors and can be considered by teenagers in reflecting on identity. Assuming teens have shared commonalities and experiences as other teens or others in society are further exclusions facing marginalized groups (Youdell, 2006). Therefore, I did not want to assume anything about teens’ experiences. I wanted to listen to their individual stories. With this supporting my philosophy that there is relevant research written about and conducted on teen learners, there is less with the inclusion of their voice (Bernhardt, 2009; Brauer &
Clark, 2008). I believe they have many answers, but previous dominant knowledges do not allow for this new voice or these new stories. What it means to be a consciously aware student and teenager may begin to have redefined definitions.

Writing an autobiography can be seen as a critical literacy practice. Critical literacy and the realization of the full embodiment of humanity begins with becoming consciously aware (Morrell, 2008). Critical literacy practices can be used as tools with teens to navigate discourses of power (p. 4). Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that all thought is mediated through language is relevant to consider here as I attempted to achieve this with my students. Vygotsky’s theory of the social formation of the mind opened the door for critical literacy skill development to be a priority in our classroom. Teens are capable of understanding the power that language has in shaping their identities, their experiences, their realities, navigating hegemonic discourses, and redefining their selves, therefore transforming oppressive social structures (Morrell, 2008). I believe the beauty of Morrell’s pedagogies of access and liberation is that youth are in a condition where they are “uniquely positioned to enact a critical literacy praxis that would promote meaningful societal change as they set in motion a life of personal freedom” (p. 7). Teens can develop and employ critical literacy skills, and then with a platform from which to be heard, teens can and will affect change in education and society. Through critical literacy, teens can come to an understanding of social relations and power in society. When teens can understand and name the conditions in which they live, they can begin to address and then change them (p. 81). True change begins with the self and societal change “begins with critical literacies. That is, how people come to interpret, deconstruct, produce, and distribute language and text that name and ultimately destabilize existing norms and
power relation in the cause of promoting change” (p. 208). This is pedagogy with the students and for the students.

4.2 Making Sense of Common Themes in the Context of the Literature

In the following section I have introduced the participating students and will provide an analysis of the common themes. The themes that emerged included: our unexpected school culture, grateful for a second language, and I can’t see what I can’t name with a focus on racism, white privilege, male privilege, Christian privilege, and color-blindness.

4.2.1 Who We Are

Students in the study wrote their autobiographies choosing to include and elaborate on factors they felt influenced their identity development and the way they understand and see the world. I have chosen to introduce the students to create a sense of who we are. Eleven out of fourteen students gave consent to participate in my study. I will introduce every student because each individual impacted and shaped this research; I will refer back to all eleven contributing individuals throughout the findings. Please note that the introductory passages are the students’ words. I have selected the passages from the openings of their autobiographies and how they introduced themselves to me. I wanted to replicate that initial introductory experience for my readers, with the same rawness, the students expressed to me. Each student prioritized a different personal experience or introductory point to begin their autobiographical journey. I wanted to respect their decisions, and have chosen to honor their introductions by reiterating them here, for my readers. Students focused on an array of topics to begin their recollected autobiographies; therefore, the autobiographies are not characterized by fluidity or
thematic consistency between them. My research methodology allowed for, indeed required, that the students tell their own stories, organize and prioritize all details in a personal manner, and to critically reflect on the conditions that have shaped their ideologies and actions (Richmond, 2002). Using pseudonyms, I will now introduce the eleven students who I embarked on this journey in alphabetical order with. Also, I have decided to use single-spacing as a cue that the students are ‘speaking’:

Alex - My historical background is different from others in the way that my biological father and my mother were both born in [Central America] which makes me a full [Central American]. In 1995, the year I was born, she immigrated to Canada without him. . . My mom’s background and culture has also impacted me. Since she is from [Central America], and they speak Spanish, she taught me that first, before English (Alex, 2011).

Ashton - Family is very important to me. I grew up with my mom, grandma, and grandpa. You may notice that a dad is out of the picture. This is because my mom chose not to allow my dad to be in my life. . . Having no dad around also made me realize how strong my mom is. She was nineteen years old, just out of high school, and beginning her schooling as a paramedic when she had me. She finished her course and got a job, and managed to put up with me all at the same time. My mom’s strength and perseverance inspires me to be much like her (Ashton, 2011).

Drew - I am proud of my heritage and could not imagine what all these settlers went through in their journey here for a better life. I could never have done what they did, to come here almost penniless, and build homes in the middle of the prairie out of mud and grass. My Mom’s Grandmother was one of those people. She came here with her parents when she was a little girl and spent the first winter in Saskatchewan in a lean-to! . . . Another great story of my family history is of my Grandfather’s Dad who was a messenger in the First World War. It was his job to transport letters to and from enemy lines. One day he was riding his horse to deliver a message and he felt a bullet graze the very top of his head. It had whizzed right through his hair! Needless to say, he immigrated to Canada after that experience (Drew, 2011).

Casey – I was born in Quebec. I lived in a small French community. I cannot remember having any friends, because there were not any other kids in the neighbourhood, but at least I had my family. A few years after I was born we moved [into the city] where I started making friends for the first time, and started a completely new life. . . Having parents in [their field of work], we were always prepared to move . . . [M]y mom came home from work one day, and announced to us that she had something very important to ask us. “Would you like to move?” Surely I wanted to say no; losing all of my friends, all the ties I have made, and not only that, but why move to a place that is seldom talked about at school, and extremely far away everything I know. Then I thought about the
opportunities, making new friends, discovering more of the world, and knowing what a big move was like. But on top of it all I wanted to support my mother in her career. The whole family collectively said yes (Casey, 2011).

Dylan - Hardest part of my life was when my mother got cancer. . . When we heard that my mom had cancer it felt like a knife was jabbed into my gut. Almost as if the world had ended. My mom tried to keep us thinking positive always saying, “I’m strong, I can beat this.” I knew my mom was tough, but I had my doubts because I knew how hard cancer is to beat. That was the first time where I have seen my mom cry due to pain. She would cry and apologize that she should not be crying and should not be so selfish. My mom, even when in so much pain was thinking of us first. Even though we told her she did not have to apologize, she would still do it. That was the moment I realized how much my mom would do and how much she cared for me (Dylan, 2011).

Kelly - Before I was even born, my grandparents on my paternal side had passed away. I was never able to see them or meet them. . . My grandparents would have had an impact on me if I had them. . . I was not able to get all the influences they could have shared with me or taught because of their absence. Therefore the development of my identity was affected in that way (Kelly, 2011).

Blair - Throughout my life, a major contributor to my identity is the amount of times my family moved. By moving from place to place, I got to learn how different people act. It helped me become a better person because I am exposed to various personal morals, attitudes, and general behaviours. . . The moves have been and remain positive influences on me. If not for moving, I would not be the person I am today. I sometimes questioned why we needed to move, but this quote explains it well enough, “[w]hy do people move? What makes them uproot and leave everything they’ve known for a great unknown beyond the horizon? . . . The answer is the same the world over: people move in the hope of a better life” (Martel 86). . . I was born in [small town] British Columbia (Blair, 2011).

Jaden - Growing up my mom was a single mother. As a child I never noticed anything missing, in my opinion everything was perfectly fine. Despite the lack of a father, my mom and I still had a support system outside of each other. My grandparents are greatly present in my childhood memories. However my mom still generally speaking took on both the mother and father role (Jaden, 2011).

Logan - When I was younger, I was never told much about my family’s history. All my parents told me was that I came from many different cultural backgrounds including American, English, Irish and German. Knowing little facts about my family’s history, I never was able to discover my families’ roots. . . I believe knowing your past is crucial for discovering yourself. Without knowing the past, a person cannot discover their future. Unfortunately, not all people can learn about their past and they are still able to continue on with their life (Logan, 2011).

Jessie - Disease has had quite a considerable influence on my life. The disease that has made the most significant impact is cancer. At age 35, which is quite young for this type
of cancer, my father was diagnosed with rectal cancer that had spread to his colon and bladder . . . My grandfather was diagnosed with liver cancer at age 67. His cancer is slow moving and he has been told that he will probably die of old age before the cancer can kill him (Jessie, 2011).

Devon - The way I have been brought up directly affects the way I see and interact with the world. I have had many encounters with different parts of my home country of Canada as a result of my father’s employment. . . Being exposed to different environments, cultures and societies shape the way I positively and critically view situations and reflect on experiences. Having exposure to four very distinct social settings is an awakening opportunity; it gives me a background that helps me to challenge my self-awareness and cultural awareness. I am originally from [urban] British Columbia, a large, culturally diverse city where it is easy to participate in stereotyping those around you due to the amount of different people. Though the majority of my physical and psychological growth occurs during my years in [rural] Alberta, [where] no one ever leaves, the population definitely fits into the “norm” as most are of the middle class, white, Christians, whereas [the next community] is surrounded by First Nations reserves and is home to many immigrant families. This is where my multi-cultural learning begins (Devon, 2011).

I have chosen to use the students’ descriptions of themselves or experiences as much as possible to emphasize my commitment to transparency, accessibility, and openness (Jones, 1999). This was a goal we had in our classroom and I want to maintain that commitment in the sharing of their stories. Absolon and Willet (2005) state a foundational value that we encompassed in our classroom as well in that “the only thing we can write with authority about is ourselves” (p. 97). We share a commitment and a responsibility in creating a new way of knowing, a new story.

4.2.2 Our Unexpected School Culture

I did not request or suggest students discuss their high school experiences within their autobiographies, yet the majority of the participants did. I did not anticipate writing about a theme that represented our school. Student stories and reflections suggested that our unexpected school culture was significant in their identity development. The ‘unexpected’ refers to the attention students paid to the culture of the school. In class, we
had never directly discussed our school’s culture or how it impacted the students’ lives. The discourses of our school were not even fully apparent to me until the students wrote about our school culture. McIvor (2010) explains when using an Indigenous research methodology it is very important to consider questions such as: “What brought you here? What do you feel you have/need to contribute to your people/community/nation? From what “place” do you speak?” (p. 140). Our identity is not separate from our environment or others. Therefore, presenting our school culture is important, relevant, and McIvor (2010) suggests this sharing maintains integrity in the research. Indigenous methodology and ways of knowing lie in the realm of acknowledging what McKinely, Brayboy, and McCarty (2010) explain is linked “through principles of relationality, responsibility, reciprocity, and respect” (p.185). There are several influencing factors contributing to our school culture which I will explore in this section. They include: spiritual development and faith; extra-curricular activities and involvement; relationships with friends/students; and staff.

Another unexpected response, related to the attention students paid to the school culture, included the students’ identity development with the school culture of faith and spirituality. The site is a faith-based Christian school where religion instruction and observances are kept. Teenagers are free to discuss their beliefs within our building and classrooms. When our beliefs are challenged and/or supported it affects identity. Alex (2011) explains that “[God] accepts you in any way or form . . . I have a different path with my education. It is not just growing and learning at school, it is learning through God”. The school culture supports the students’ spiritual development; therefore, a shared
experience of spirituality is a commonality or norm among the students in this study.

Dylan articulated his identity transformation through questioning God’s existence;

> [h]ow could something so terrible happen if there was a God looking out for us? That question ran through my head many times during my mother’s illness. . . . The confusion created by this has made me believe but not believe. I think I believe there is a God, but it is hard to after all that has happened this past year (Dylan, 2011).

Teens struggle with their faith. Our school culture opens spaces where these doubts can be openly shared. In exploration of naming oppression in society, Logan (2011) began questioning; “What happened to the world? God always told us to love one another as he has loved us. So why are the privileged able to gain success in life?” The shared experience of a faith-based community, enriched by spiritual teachings can be built upon and translated into the other facets of identity that develop a school culture.

Given the students’ collective recognition of the importance of the school’s spiritual culture in their lived experience, it is not surprising that the extra-curricular activities in which they are involved are also seen to influence and shape them. Extra-curricular activities are the next facet of school culture that students recollect has influenced them. For example, Ashton feels that

> [h]aving the opportunity to be part of many athletic teams has had a great effect on my identity. Through my sports I have met a lot of great people who have helped me develop myself both physically and mentally. . . . We all become family during a season. . . . Sports are not only a physical game, but a mental game. You have to be able to sacrifice for your team. To sacrifice for your team often means missing many social outings to develop your athletic abilities. It means pushing through the tough times, never giving up on yourself or your team. . . . I had to strive to be an asset for my team. This has helped me develop a strong sense of hope, as I know I can do it. It also has taught me to have the strength to go on, pushing your hardest even at your weakest moments. My athletics have also have given me a strong sense of commitment. To be committed is to recognize your role with-in the team and always be there to fill it (Ashton, 2011).
The embracing culture of this school may come from a team mentality. I see evidence in Ashton’s words that he has taken up this discourse of team sports as a belief system. Casey, who was new to our school last year, was very nervous to become part of the school activities. He was nervous because

> having completely changed schools, and having no more friends, I had many doubts about trying out for the team, I did not want to be ridiculed at a new school because of volleyball. Despite all doubts, I attended the try outs. I was stunned when I not only made the team, but also became captain of the junior boys team. That year was a completely new experience, I played almost every game, and best of all when we lost, which we did a lot, I was not blamed. With all of my game time I grew as a volleyball player and became more confident and talented in the game. When playing with the team, I forgot all feelings, if I felt unhappy before a practice, I would leave happy (Casey, 2011).

In Saskatchewan, athletic competitions between schools are organized into divisions by size of enrollment. Our school is considered a “small” school within the provincial system. As Casey’s reflection reveals, sometimes students can become involved more easily in a small school. Despite being nervous about tryouts, he was able to find his place in the school through volleyball which is reminiscent of Youdell’s (2006) explanation of social and material circumstances that create a school culture. She explains the significance in recognizing “variant social and cultural practices are developed and circulate and how these come to complement or contradict or be incommensurate with each other” (p. 34) are important factors. In these student reflections, I believe the school culture was complementing identity development.

Sports are not the only extra-curricular opportunity at our school. There is a balance between the arts and athletics. Blair explains that the school reflects his personal experiences; “[m]y lifestyle is one of a kind: I have a deep appreciation for the arts, meanwhile loving the intensity, along with the physical and mental exertion of the sports
that I play” (Blair, 2011). He loves the lessons sports have taught him, but he also expresses the importance of music and he reflects,

I have played hockey, broomball, soccer, football, baseball, ringette, volleyball, lacrosse, track and field, wrestling, bowling and swimming to name a few. They have all helped form the person I am today. I learned determination, how to work as a team, commitment, to take the good with the bad, to always give your all, and how to look deeper inside myself so I can find that drive to surmount any obstacle in my way. . . At school I am involved with choir, vocal jazz and the school rock band. I participate in all of these programs because I love to sing. . . If it were not for music, I would not be involved in as many activities and not have made so many of my friends. Through music, I can cope with situations and move on to face new challenges, moving me closer to my destination (Blair, 2011).

Our students are diverse and involved in a wide repertoire of activities. I believe our students, through the dichotomy of the arts and athletics, such as the examples provided, encompass Lake’s (2010) explanation of identity in that each person is a product of his/her biological, social, and cultural experiences that shape personal ways of knowing, being, and expressing. Extra-curricular activities provide Blair different opportunities for him to be and express himself through his personal ways of knowing. As Blair noted above, he is also affected by and grateful for his friendships.

Friendships are powerful influences in teenagers’ lives. Now our school culture is not void of bullying or oppression (thus the need for this study), but our students are conscious of others and their personal journeys. I believe the students exercise this quality because the environment is quite transient and they are regularly meeting and working with new peers. Students at our school tend to default to an embracing community identity, rather than what Walton (2005) describes as an emphasis on individualization, behaviourism, and exploitation. Upon registration at our school, Casey recalls that “I soon realised when school started that well… I had no friends. I was not aware of what school life was like not having friends until that day, which forced me to
start thinking. Some people live like this every day” (Casey, 2011). Here, Casey is expressing the importance in seeing ourselves in others. Lake (2010) suggests that this “in turn enables us to see beyond external abstractions of humanity into the lived experience of others” (p. 43). Casey’s hardships began to diminish. He reflected stating, “my problems seemed to have subsided, I had many friends that I could depend on, and a steady flow of martial arts that kept me active. I find it funny how it took me one entire year to realize that it was not [my new school], but it was my lack of acceptance that kept me depressed” (Casey, 2011). Casey exemplifies the extreme difference between tolerance and acceptance. And acceptance depends on reciprocity. I believe that Casey is discussing relational accountability of Indigenous learning. He now understands “[r]espect, reciprocity and responsibility are key features of any healthy relationship and must be included in an Indigenous methodology” (Wilson, 2007, p. 77). Casey now realizes he is not in a neutral space. In understanding this he has moved from apathy and become responsible for his personal actions and choices.

Friendships at school can lead to community building. Remember Dylan and his struggles dealing with his mother’s cancer? Kelly and Dylan became friends through school, and Dylan was so grateful for their friendship during those difficult times. A friendship between two boys transpired into a life-long bond between families. Dylan recalls,

[f]riends did show us support during this period. Most people were just sending cards or emails to the family, wishing my mom luck in the battle. There was one family that stood out from the rest, [Kelly’s] family. They offered their own home if any of us needed to escape and just be away from seeing my mom being sick. They told us if we need anything, they would be there for us and they were just a call away. That really shows you the love and friendship in between the families and it is good to know someone is out there for you. I believe that if anything like
this happened to their family we would be the exact same with the amount of support they gave us (Dylan, 2011).

I will reiterate here Indigenous methodology and ways of knowing lie in the realm relationality, responsibility, reciprocity, and respect. Dylan’s excerpt above displays this knowledge in the most human way, with his story. This is why I have chosen to go to the students, go to the margins, to find the answers.

In addition, we see the effects of reciprocated friendship and respect when Kelly also expresses the importance of friendship in his autobiography. Kelly explains,

I made a lot of friends [at school] who are still in my life now. It shows how important friends are because they are always there for you no matter what. Woodrow Wilson once said, "[f]riendship is the only cement that will ever hold the world together". This on many levels can be applied to my journey in life. Without my friends to support me on whatever I do, I would not be able to stand. By having friends my social identity is developed and affected by the certain friends I have. In my opinion, friends also represent a part of you. For example is you have very kind friends, you too will be a nice person because of your friends will give a positive atmosphere and influence on to you and your life. Thus my identity was affected on the friends I have grown up with.

Kelly encompasses Connell’s (1993) explanation of schools being centrally involved in the creating and shaping of social identities. Kelly highlights that the school culture and peers can influence individuals’ identities positively or negatively. When he writes, “friends also represent a part of you”, Kelly is explaining that if a group’s dominant discourse is positive, that positivity and kindness become the norm of the group. The norm will be perpetuated and will require students to act in certain ways, or they will not meet the status quo. Students are not the only ones who perpetuate dominant discourses within a school.

The final contributor to school culture that I am going to explore is the staff.

When I began working at this school seven years ago, I recall walking through the halls
with one teacher, chatting. The conversation was continually interrupted by his greetings to and from students in passing. He recognized the difficulty we were having in completing our conversation, but did not apologize. Instead, he did the opposite. He explained to me his dedication to greeting students, by name, everywhere he went throughout the school. He deemed it important, and I could not have agreed more. When a visitor walks into our school people greet the guest. Both students and staff hold the door open for visitors, say hello, or ask if they can help. I was introduced to the discourse of the school and the cultural norm to be welcoming and inclusive. My identity was shaped by this school culture when I began working there because I was introduced to ways of thinking and knowing. At the time, I did not recognize these as examples of Indigenous ways of knowing, but McKinley, Brayboy, and McCarty explain that “another way of thinking about these ways of knowing is to view them as threads, which, when woven together, make up the cultural cloth of particular communities” (p. 186). I began to learn about the community I was becoming a part of, and the same happened to both Casey and Logan when they moved to our school. When Casey first arrived and had not yet made any friends, he reflected on the loneliness he felt,

> until one day, while waiting for lunch to end in front of my class, like I did every day, a teacher invited me into the computer lab. It was the first time that I felt like I belonged somewhere in that school, so I made it a habit to spend my lunches in the computer lab relaxing, and working on my school work (Casey, 2011).

This is an example of one teacher who represents the school culture of community and through his commitment he reaches out to students “thereby insuring community survival” (McKinley, Brayboy & McCarty, 2010 p. 187). Logan was also new to our
school and in her autobiography she wrote about the counterstory, reflecting on her experiences from her prior school;

I still did not enjoy my experience in private school. Many of the teachers and school faculty members judged other students based on their social status within the school, and how much money your family had. Since I did not have as much money compared to the other students, I was not given many opportunities and being judged because lots of faculty compared me to my brother, who was not the most behaved student. They judged me as being a trouble maker, because they thought my family was trouble. If you questioned them about their orthodox, they would certainly deny these allegations, but truly they know that their treatment was unfair. Through my experiences, I am able to recollect on various situational encounters that have occurred through my lifetime. Through power, and social class I was able to see how people obtain and maintain their relations with in a society (Logan, 2011).

Therefore, at our school, Logan began to feel the differences and realized that the new school was not about individualism. Instead, she noticed what McKinley, Brayboy, and McCarty (2010) explain in that, “it is a sense that individuals act outside of their self-interests for those of the community and work toward their own betterment for the community’s sake” (p. 191). And so, our unexpected school culture was evident in the students’ autobiographies. The school is part of the larger institution of a faith-based school division. Our school’s culture has been influenced by the division ethos, but not all faith-based schools possess the same culture. I did not predict that the school’s culture would affect the students’ identities as significantly as it appears to have. The significance of the influence the school culture and discourses had on the students is what was unexpected by me.

4.2.3 Grateful for a Second Language

Over half the students in the study speak a language in addition to English. The language landscape of the research site is a French Immersion school. French Immersion students are required to take one ELA class per year. Consequently, it is very common to
have equal numbers of immersion and English speaking students in ELA classes. Therefore, because ELA 20 is the only mandatory grade eleven ELA credit in Saskatchewan, all immersion students take the class which explains why there are more multilingual students in this class than in mainstream classrooms. Predictably, a theme of language acquisition emerged in my reading of the autobiographies. Students who were bilingual and even trilingual were very grateful for the opportunity of second or third language acquisition and revealed that their languages became an important part of their identities. For example, Casey grew up speaking French as his first language. Casey was using English as his primary language at his new school, the site of this research. He realized how his identity was shaped by and with French and now that was changing. His identity was wrapped up in language. He believed his French was deteriorating here and it affected his entire being. Casey stated, “I was slowly losing my French.” This affected Casey and he explained that

[t]his realisation put me in a slight depression, knowing that my French was diminishing by the day. I felt as if I was an Acadian getting assimilated in Louisiana. The only thing that kept me going was my mom, always speaking to me in French, and my strong desire to keep my mother tongue. Language has always been the most important thing to me, I always felt the need to communicate as fluently as possible, in as many languages as possible. Feeling as if I was losing one of my languages felt like I was losing part of myself. No matter what I tried to do, I would often catch myself making slight errors in my pronunciation and grammar, which were typical mistakes for the other French immersion students. When speaking with my friends from Ottawa they would only say how much poorer my French was, making me feel even worse about it. My confidence in my language was completely gone (Casey, 2011).

Casey’s struggle with identity is directly linked to language. He provides a very subtle example of the oppression generations have felt and experienced at the hands of English education. The dominant language challenged Casey’s first language, even at this bilingual school. French and English are the official languages of Canada, but English is
dominant in Saskatchewan. He recognizes the assimilation, language policy, economics, and that school is the mechanism for imposing those larger social and political discourses. English and literacy education, along with communities where English is the dominant language continue to oppress anyone who is not the norm. Casey began, possibly subconsciously, becoming part of the dominant discourse to identify with the norm. With small pronunciation errors he began to fit into the norm the Immersion program had set. ELA teachers can encourage students and communities to realize their rights “by preserving, enhancing, and sharing their cultural heritages” (Willinsky, 2000, p. 10). Casey engaged in critical literacy activities all semester within the class, along with critique of power relations and norms within society. He studied several different types of oppression and applied his understanding in literary analysis of texts. After personal reflection and writing, he was able to tell his own story of identity and language. Anti-oppressive ELA education needs to expose students to texts and stories that are critical of dominant and oppressive value systems; “they need to be given texts that provide counter-histories and counter-narratives in general; and they need to read texts that are culturally affirming, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive” (Morrell, 2008, p. 212). I believe if students can understand what is happening in another story, they can see alternate realities within their own story. Casey recognized that his identity was challenged when using his first language was no longer the norm. French is the example used here, but more seriously the dominance of English education is more painfully felt in Indigenous communities. French is spoken in Quebec and France and is protected by federal legislation and policy. Whereas, in contrast, when an Indigenous
language such as Cree is obliterated, there is no ‘home country’ where the language is preserved.

Several of Casey’s peers believed that being immersion students impacted their identities as well, but in positive ways. Kelly admitted his education plays a huge role in his identity development when he reflects while

[growing up, I was raised by my father who spoke English and my mother who spoke both French and English. Since my parents wanted me to be bilingual and have a strong knowledge of language, they sent me to [an elementary] French immersion school. There, from kindergarten to grade eight I was taught how to read and write in French. This had a large impact on my life because it challenged me a lot and made me constantly work hard to better understand the language. Therefore, by being bilingual my identity is shaped differently which gives me a different look on the world. (p. 3)

Kelly feels he has been benefitted or even privileged to be literate in a second language.

Blair feels the same way as he explains:

I am who I am today partly because of my family history. Because of my father’s side of the family, I can speak French and I am metis [sic]. . . My father’s family speaks mostly French, so it is critical I learn this language. If I could not speak French, I never would have learned so much, met the people I have, been immersed into a whole culture, or even have the same thought processes and habits (Blair, 2011).

Blair understands that different literacy experiences impact who one is. As part of our critical literacy skill development, I wanted students to start seeing the power and agency in literacies, critical multiliteracies, as a tool in anti-oppression education. Having the ability to speak two languages is cognitively advantageous, but in Canada, being bilingual is a cultural and economic advantage also. There is merit in every student’s story and as a class we decided that the best way to demonstrate respect for all stories, for all identities, for all experiences, and for all abilities was to “honor their brilliance and perceptiveness; to tap into their natural curiosity about words and the world while
constantly being aware of the consequences of our failure to act” (Morrell, 2008, p. 211). It became somewhat of a class philosophy and students began to feel gratitude and pride in their different skill sets.

Jessie briefly touched on her new insight on her identity as a bilingual student. She explains:

Being in French Immersion has helped my identity development because knowing more languages means that I can speak with people from around the world. For me, knowing French is a positive learning experience for me because I am expanding my mind to broader horizons. Also, knowing French is a good way to communicate with my friends because many of them also speak French (Jessie, 2011).

In this passage, I feel Jessie is articulating the importance she places on language education. The Immersion students seemed to have a heightened appreciation for literacy education and saw it as an avenue to success for their futures. I believe that their ideologies on education are also developed by social class. What I wanted to do was to make sure the students did not deem themselves as being privileged because they are bilingual, but to see it as a call to action and use it to “increase academic achievement and to facilitate educational and social justice” (Morrell, 2008, p. 14). I wanted students to see themselves as having the ability to use anti-oppressive education practices that name oppressive issues, to be motivated or engaged to actively close a gap, chipping away at these oppressive boundaries that continue to separate humanity, to create a sense of urgency, in order to create a broadening social awareness and efficacy.

Experiences of differences like second language acquisition can be an avenue for growth. When I heard Devon’s articulation of her cultural and language immersion experiences, I felt there was further evidence of students’ understandings of literacy as a gateway to engagement to contribute to social awareness. I use the term anti-oppressive,
but often times students say multi-cultural and use the term interchangeably. St. Denis’ (2011) critique of multicultural education is valuable here. Although multicultural education was “intended to acknowledge the need for increased understanding between ethnic groups” (p. 307) it has done the opposite. She writes, “[d]iscourses of multiculturalism enable racism and colonialism” (p. 308). I have chosen to do anti-oppressive work rather than multicultural education because of St. Denis’ critique. Devon discusses that her definition of multi-cultural does not simply mean diverse races, it means a variety of traditions, languages and religions coming together. . . I think language education is extremely important because of the exposure to the world around you. Whether it is French, German, Mandarin, or Spanish, learning a language challenges a person and exposes the person to the culture. . . I find confidence in knowing two languages and others come easier now, graduating as a French bilingual student provides more job opportunities and countless exchange programs, similar to the one I am participating in, and that is just in Canada! Language and your place of education contribute greatly to your social status, personal ideologies and paradigms (Devon 2011).

Here Devon expresses her comprehension of power relations in society and the hierarchy of power imposed on us all based on our education, ability, language, and class. Understanding our own experiences in education begins a movement. Students began to see how knowledge itself is divided and not distributed equally in society and we are “products of intricate politics shaped by the wider distribution of social power” (Connell, 1993, p. 31). My methodology enabled me to recognize how students understand, discuss, and apply inequity concepts beyond literature to their personal experiences and growth by acknowledging themselves as subjects of education as a social process; “[k]nowledge is a social product” (Connell, 1993, p. 109). Through writing an autobiography these students were realizing that their identities were shaped by institutional and cultural practices and ideologies.
4.2.4 I Can’t See What I Can’t Name

Continuing with my attempt to employ anti-oppressive education through ELA, I felt it was important for students to begin a process of recognition that exploitation, injustice, and oppression are examples of lost humanity (Freire, 1997). Seeking to regain humanity is not simply an exchange of power. This would be what Freire calls becoming “oppressors of the oppressors”. Instead, an entirely new way of knowing must emerge to eliminate oppression. Freire suggests that the oppressed can become “the restorers of the humanity of both” (p. 26). In my approach to anti-oppressive pedagogy, I wanted to parallel Freire’s term pedagogy of the oppressed. In doing so, I attempted to be transparent in explaining I was working with the students in attempting to create a critical awakening, not for the students.

Two priorities we implemented in the classroom were the use of a common language and of reflection as a way of understanding ourselves and the world. Having a set of language and terms was required before we could understand, recognize, discuss, or write about oppression. The second priority was opportunities for reflection. Freire expresses that reflection is essential for action. The actions I was seeking were critical awareness of oppression and a movement from apathy to action. I believe once we move from ignorance, we can no longer ignore. We cannot change what we do not know. In this section, students explain some of their realizations, experiences with oppressions, and how they have moved from apathy to action. I will provide student examples of “new knowledge” and critical awakenings in the areas of critical literacy, racism, white, Christian, and male privileges, a discussion of colorblindness, and why the response to my burning questions is anti-oppressive education. I wanted the students to see
themselves as active participants in oppression. I used Freire’s (1997) explanation that neither objectivity nor subjectivity can exist without the other. None of us are ever in neutral positions in society.

Devon began her autobiography in an interesting way that paralleled how I introduced anti-oppressive education in our ELA 20 class. She began:

Every one of us has a unique story or background and that background defines who we are and will be. The objective of this class is to give us a chance to look at the way we think, where we fit in society and how we understand society. Due to the fact that everyone has a unique background it is often challenging to understand other peoples’ circumstances and relate to their beliefs and ways of life because you do not always have a concrete understanding of the situation. It is difficult to fully understand our self and our journey far less to truly understand others and their journeys. I only now find myself critically thinking about my beliefs and my place in society due to the reflecting I have done over the last few months. . . My upbringing, schooling, position in society, and societal interactions have all defined my self-awareness, cultural awareness and personal identity. All aspects of my life must be considered starting with my childhood (Devon, 2011).

First of all, Devon discusses identity and how we come to know ourselves through hegemonic discourses. Therefore, she expresses the need to understand society’s discourses before we can truly understand how our identity development has been influenced. This explanation expresses her new knowledge for the necessity of critical literacy skills as a tool for navigating society’s hegemonic discourses; she also deems it essential in the understanding and redefining of herself (Morrell, 2008). Devon demonstrates here that a critical awakening can come through education that simultaneously provides the content matter of the curriculum. Students are capable of “learning new knowledge, while critiquing the very ways we come to know” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 7). Students are inundated daily with “racist, sexist, classist language and texts that threaten to circumscribe their worldview and encourage them to participate willingly in preserving a status quo that may be problematic and oppressive toward others that do
not look or think like the ‘norm’” (Morrell, 2008, p. 6). The preservation of the status quo works against students and hardens the oppressive boundaries that are already in place. The new knowledge gained through critical literacy will lead toward “engaged citizenship and personal emancipation” (p. 7) which are both needed in anti-oppressive education.

Kelly elaborated on this notion or “new knowledge” of identity development applying it to his personal experiences. In this next passage, Kelly is articulating his realization that no one is in an innocent space; he recognized his apathy and moves away from his passivity throughout our anti-oppressive pedagogical journey;

It was not until the third year of high school that I started to realize my role in society. . . Knowing that I play a role I now
[still] understand that racism, sexism, classism, etc., are always operating in every social setting, and continually practice recognizing and articulating how they are operating; [also] you build your critical thinking skills, build your practice skills by working to challenge the manifestation of oppression that you see. (DiAngelo 101)

This quote demonstrates how important my education is to understand the world. Therefore through schooling, my identity was developed in such a way that it has changed my personal view on the world. By taking ELA 20, my thoughts on the world and identity were brought out in numerous ways. Firstly, I was taught to “[l]earn to read the word and world” (Freire). . . With the power of language demonstrated in the previous quote, shows how important reading and understanding language is towards a more advanced and progressive life. . . But being a critical reader is more than just a reading skill. It also gives you awareness of what is going on around you. For example, by being a critical listener, viewer and reader I am able to better understand who I am as a person (Kelly, 2011).

Kelly outlines a few key anti-oppressive experiences we had in class. First, I presented ELA curricular materials to the class explaining that curriculum is a government document, and therefore it comes with political representations, inclusions, and perspectives. When students are familiar with this background, they understand the need for learning to read in critical ways (Kumashiro, 2001). Second, I believed the more open
I could be with the students, the more silence we could effectively disrupt. Every day I said, “if we can’t name the issues, how can we address them?” The students were familiar with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* because, not only did I share information about the background of curriculum and texts, I also shared the background, theories, and philosophy I was using in my teaching. Freire’s “[t]o exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it” (1997, p. 69) became an everyday theme in our classroom. Teaching specific terms and concepts was my intentional method to expose students to oppression in society. Third, Kelly not only understood the need for critical literacy skills within our classroom, but he transferred that awareness to his interpretations of society and the world beyond the school. As a sixteen year-old-student, he is beginning to understand Freire’s (1997) explanation of the power of the word. Anti-oppressive education can disrupt students’ ways of knowing and then develop a critical awareness in students, inviting them to be privy to some of the truths in society. Finally, during the semester, I observed that the students were beginning to develop critical literacy skills that allowed them to critique social structures in texts to better understand self and society. Kelly exemplified the transformation within himself (Wilson, 2007) in his awakening to defy passivity. The students became active and aware participants in a more just “human family” (Morrell, 2008). Once students reach a critical awakening, through critical literacy, they can affect change and echoing Kelly, “thus to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire, 1997, p. 68).

Students were willing to tell stories about racism. In our classroom, we placed value on the importance of questioning “the stories people tell as a way of understanding
the reproduction of racism and the possibilities for intervention through using story” (Bell, 2003, p. 3) in our ELA class. Alex discusses her personal insights into racism;

I have experienced racism and have been a witness to it. It may not have been intentional, but it still happened. If you look different or act different, you are marginalized in many ways. In one instance I was asked if I had crossed the border illegally to come to Canada. This shocked me, in that I had nothing to say. Did people really think of me this way? I am not Mexican but since I am part Hispanic, I was marginalized. . . It was not until after thinking about this for a long time, did I realize that this was a form of racism. In, Race Ethnicity and Education, the girls who were interviewed always found a way to downplay racism, or said that it did not exist. I compare this in a way that people do not realize what racism is. . . I agree with the author, “racism can come in a multiplicity of forms (Raby, 2004, p.368). It was also stated that, “Because racism is so loaded and negative, it may be easier to call it something else, like bias or stereotype in order to maintain a racism-free identity for their school (372). . .

[Recognizing] these experiences have made me proud of who I am because I know that I am special because of it. I am different (Alex, 2011).

Alex includes several examples of racism in the above excerpt. She emphasizes that race is a factor in society. She understands the importance in sharing stories of racism because these stories can be a way for students to understand the reproduction of racism (Bell, 2003) happening in our everyday lives. I encouraged Alex to do some research on racism to understand how racism often works to perpetuate the status quo to maintain a dominant social role. Gallagher (2003) writes that if we ignore race we “allow whites to imagine that being white or black or brown has no bearing on an individual’s or groups’ relative place in the socio-economic hierarchy” (p. 1). While I encouraged her to analyze her experiences, I explained Bell’s (2003) notion that stories and recollections can bridge her individual experiences with systematic social patterns of oppression. Therefore, it can be a tool for students in becoming more critically aware of racism in our society. Furthermore, Alex can use her personal story to enable her as an oppressed person to name the racism, and reclaim herself against the dominant group’s position of superior.
Kelly also includes an anecdote about examples of racism he recognizes and his application and explanation of how he comprehends social inequities with the context of our class. He begins:

throughout my growing awareness of the world, I am able to read the world and recognize the social inequality around me. My thoughts of racism and inequality were never really triggered or questioned before and never really affected my life until now. I believe that racism is a terrible act of inequality and lack of understanding between two races. This has been and unfortunately still is a problem that goes on in today’s society and continually affects people. Since the white race is considered to be the norm in North America, all the other races are marginalized. This means that all their thoughts or beliefs are sometimes pushed to the sides and ignored. Therefore their thoughts are not heard (Kelly, 2011).

I believe it is important to discuss race and racism because a racialized society is maintained when these conversations and stories are muted and marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Kelly also understands the shared priority we had as a class. Race matters and I wanted students to see this in the context of the literature we studied;

Through the different readings and exercises I have been doing in school, it has helped to take a look at the world and made my awareness of racism grow. For example, by being an active reader I was able to apply an article we read in class to my life. It was about a black male playing in the NHL and has caught off guard when he was hit by a banana peel that a fan threw at him. In my opinion, this act was a strong act of racism no matter what. . .[the player] said, “I guess it [is] something I obviously have to deal with, being a black player playing a predominantly white sport” (Nguyen). In my opinion, his view on it is wrong. Just because you are a different race than the norm, does not mean you should be mistreated because of it. This is an act of hatred or even white supremacy (Kelly, 2011).

Here Kelly understands the act of racism is “beyond the discourse of white privilege” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). In class, I used Leonardo’s stance that if we were going to critically look at and name racism, we could not ignore doing a “rigorous examination of white supremacy, or the analysis of white racial domination (p. 137). The following
excerpt explains another instance where we analyzed how white racial supremacy secures its domination in society:

Another short article [from the local newspaper] that we read in ELA 20 affected my view on the world and demonstrated how racism still exists. This article was about an Aboriginal man trying to borrow someone’s cell phone because his friend was drowning in the lake but no one believed him. . . I believe that because he was both unkempt and Aboriginal, it gave him a very low chance of getting anyone’s cell phone. I am not surprised at all with the outcome of this story because I would probably have done the same. I would have done this because of the assumptions I have on certain races. Growing up, I would always hear of crimes and killings done by Aboriginal people which gave me a negative view on Aboriginals and made me continually scared. . . With the exercises done in ELA 20, I was able to understand how society works and views people. This problem has to be fixed but is sometimes hard to conquer. I learned that if I do not know the issue than I would never be able to address it. Therefore, because of my past experiences I am able to take what I have learned an address it to my life and thus better recognize my racial ideologies.

Kelly mentioned the racist stories heard growing up. These stories were successful in perpetuating racism. Kelly admitted that he feared Aboriginal people because the “stories connect us to and perpetuate a racial status quo” (Bell, 2003, p. 3). I know these racist stories operated in my life, as they do in the students’ lives. When students confirmed these stories operated in shaping their racial ideologies, I had to address the stories in a way that did not continue to contribute to the racial oppression. Therefore, I used these stories of racism as a learning tool “to help us be more conscious of historical and current realities, and through this consciousness, interrupt the stories that prevent the movement toward democratic and inclusive community” (p. 4). A goal of my anti-oppressive pedagogy informed by Indigenous methods was to be transformative (Wilson, 2007) for the individuals participating in the research. Kelly articulates his transformation in the next excerpt;

Finally, I am left with the most eye opening assignment given to me that really demonstrated to me and the world how racism still happens daily. The assignment
was to tell a story where you have witnessed inequality or racism in the world. My story was about an Aboriginal male who wore a bulky jacket, walked into a grocery store to purchase groceries. He was later followed throughout the store by the manager because he apparently looked suspicious. After he purchased his groceries he was pulled to the side by the manager and was asked to open his coat. The Aboriginal was very unimpressed but complied anyways to prove his innocence. The manager did not find anything in the man’s coat and became embarrassed. He later checked the security footage just to make sure and found that the Aboriginal male did not steal anything. He found that the Aboriginal man did not steal anything but a white male did and was unseen by everyone. One of our topic questions was; what can never be said about this story? . . . What can never be said or heard from this story is the Aboriginal’s point of view. He was rather silenced throughout the story and therefore the reader would never be able to understand what he was feeling or what was going on in his mind. This situation occurred this year, about two weeks before the assignment was given. It made me really understand how the problem of racism is everywhere around me and I was able to witness it firsthand right in front of me. This assignment showed me how much these negative experiences really cause trauma to the oppressed because an oppressed person’s life is “built on fear, violation and panic” (Dei 127) (Kelly 2011).

Kelly discusses a non-fiction text I presented in class to bear witness to the racism in our community and society. Here Kelly is using a strategy that Bell (2003) calls *telling on racism: counter-narrative stories*. I wanted to make clear to the students that there is a fine line between perpetuating racism through story and ‘telling on’ racism. The difference is that telling on racism calls attention to social relations that work to maintain the dominant group and deny the marginalized. This is hugely important, and I wanted to make this the focus. In class, we differentiated between “stories that support mainstream views of and assumptions about race and racism from those counter-narratives which challenge the mainstream discourse” (p. 3). Racism is deeply ingrained (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in society and we cannot affect change until we recognize and name racism. I was very hopeful, because students began to exercise this naming.

Similarly, Ashton was candid about racism inundating our classrooms;
My social identity was also developed drastically when I experienced a case of stereotypical discrimination. I was in photography class and we had a First Nations boy in our class. I left my wallet on my desk while I went to ask a quick question. I returned to my desk and my friend said, “You should not have left your wallet just sitting here. I wouldn’t trust Bob sitting next to you. They need their money for their Lysol.” I was absolutely appalled by this comment. I immediately responded, “What are you talking about? Bob is one of the nicest guys I know!” My friend would not have known this if I would not have made her aware. I also made her aware that what she did was absolutely unacceptable. This showed me how often racism occurs, and the prejudice placed on other people. I now am extremely aware of racial marginalization of, mainly, First Nations people. It also made me realize that as a society we need to understand that racism, sexism, classism etc., are always operating in every social setting (not just when an accident occurs) and continually practice recognizing and articulating on how they are operating; as you build your critical thinking skills, build your practice skills by working to challenge the manifestation of oppression that you see (DiAngelo, and Sensoy 101).

Meaning there is always some sense of discrimination happening around you it is just realizing and acting on it when you see it occurring. It is your choice, are you going to watch it happen? Or stand up for what is right? After what I have witnessed I will work to stop oppression (Ashton, 2011).

I chose to have students write their autobiographies to use their voices as a platform at least in part to share stories like Ashton’s. Story provides an opportunity to communicate both the experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed, a step on the road to justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Without the presence of students’ stories, change will be minimal in education, and therefore in society. Without the authentic, relevant, current, and candid voices and stories from students, “it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 58). I needed to hear and learn about the students’ experiences of racism, their truths, to make anti-oppressive education relevant for the students. The “sharing, growth, and learning” (Wilson, 2007, p. 77) process was reciprocal.

We began studying racism using texts as a vehicle to explore the experience, manifestation, origin, perpetuation, discourses, and norms.
I define identity as the qualities and beliefs of a person and for every single person that is unique. In the past and many places today, countless people become victims to a forced abandonment of identity. The movie *The Rabbit-Proof Fence* proves my point of how people are ripped away from their culture and become subject to the White, middle-class, Christian morals and teachings in harsh environments. The same happens with April and Cheryl in *April Raintree* when they become subject to foster care. All of the victims of oppression in these novels were visible minorities in Canada and the United States. I would say that I now have a more enlightened insight of our world, giving me the ability to act against the oppression that I spend so much time reflecting on (Devon, 2011).

Then, I was hoping through scaffolding, students would transfer that awareness into their own communities and lives. Jaden discusses how beginning to see and understand racism has affected her life. She tells the following story;

During Mosaic I wanted to go to the Aboriginal pavilion, and when I said that I wanted to go my friend told me not to even bother asking because her mom hated “those people”. Another time my friends and I were driving past someone and not only would they verbalize racist stereotypes, so would their parents. I then realized racism towards certain races had become the norm, and most people didn’t consider it racist or seem ashamed that they were considered racist. Some people even admit they’re racist and laugh about it (Jaden, 2011).

First, I will explain what Mosaic is. Mosaic is a cultural event hosted annually in Regina, Saskatchewan, by The Regina Multicultural Council. The council’s “mandate is to educate the public about different cultures and foster positive relations between communities through increasing public knowledge and appreciation of different ethnic groups’ art, culture, language and traditions” (Regina Multicultural Council, para 1).

Although the intent may be positive, Mosaic pavilions showcase trivialized concepts of culture such as: food, drink, music, dance, and clothing. I believe this is the lived experience of the banality of racism. Second, Jaden’s friends’ reactions to the Aboriginal pavilion, and her inability to ignore and dismiss their attitudes (as indicated by the inclusion of the anecdote in the autobiography) is significant because it exemplifies a
movement from apathy to action. The example demonstrates how the anti-oppressive teaching has gone beyond reading literary texts, to ‘reading the world.’

What became clearer to me as I studied the autobiographies is that students’ personal lives are inundated with experiences of racism. Jaden’s story emphasized the importance for education to provide a different experience of anti-oppression. The reality is the “lack of interchange has hindered the struggle for spiritually vibrant, intellectually challenging, and politically operative schools for both Indian and non-Indian students” (Grande, 2004, p. 3). Theory alone will not affect any change. If theory is to be an agent of healing or is to be liberatory, it is educator’s role to ‘link the lived experience of theorizing to the process of self-discovery and social transformation” (p. 3). My hope is that I have accomplished this role with threading together anti-oppressive educational strategies with the use of autobiography, and exploration of self to lead to social transformation.

Racism is prevalent in Logan’s life as well. The following is her candid sharing of the racism that exists in her life, how it is related to class, and how it is perpetuated;

I have many racist descendants, but I do not agree with the concept of racism. I have descendants from both the southern United States and I have descendants that were part of the Second World War. Since the Southern United States is generally a racist culture, I have been brought up to believe that only white people deserve benefits. I do not in any circumstances support racism because I believe that putting down someone because of the way you were born is wrong. By raising critical awareness one could see the consequences of racial actions. . . I feel though it is present in both the dominant and oppressed society . . . In the poem, The Old Man’s Lazy, by Peter Blue Cloud, the native people are being stereotyped by the white people in their community. The theme of this poem is misunderstanding and assumption, because people always assume that somebody who’s different than them is strange and is in need of help. It is dangerous to assume because by assuming something, relationships can be destroyed. By knowing our personal assumptions and biases, we can develop critical awakening, which challenges our perspective on life (Logan, 2011).
Logan recognizes the difference between her views on race versus her family’s views. In being honest and naming the racism that is perpetuated in her life, she is moving from apathy to action. She is not allowing the status quo to prevail (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) any longer within herself. Logan is being the change. It begins with understanding our assumptions, biases, and what society deems as status quo. When we can name these issues, we can begin to address them, then transform as Logan demonstrates.

Devon believes there is a very important connection between education and ideologies. I appreciated her discussing this because it suggests that all educational spaces could be addressing oppression and oppressive mindsets;

Paradigms do not have to define a person; paradigms can shift with experience and exposure to your surroundings. The shift in my life is incredibly moving and I have become so aware of my surroundings. That shift occurs frequently after reflecting on the question of addressing issues if you cannot even name the issue because it is hard not to question your philosophies. Racism is a perfect example, especially here in our own province, and I am not the only one that sees it. James Wood writes in an article about First Nations Members of the Legislative Assembly and that there are too few aboriginal representatives considering the large First Nations population. Shockingly, out of fifty-eight Saskatchewan Party candidates, only five of them are aboriginal (Wood) (Devon, 2011).

Devon is discussing borders (Grande, 2004). These are artificial boundaries that suggest the norm and maintain binaries of racism. Devon believes the borders need to be crossed to create spaces “where new cultures can be created” (p. 93). She uses her critical skills to decipher the article we read in class, and then transferred her new knowledge which resulted in a personal paradigm shift for her. I believe she is suggesting that if our personal paradigms can shift, so can society in the way it treats race. Identity is ever changing and race relations is not a stable and homogeneous construct either (Grande, 2004). Devon instills a note of hope.
I began the class with racism awareness education in hope that I would be able to apply successfully theories of racism to other specific types of oppression in society. In the following section will demonstrate how I scaffolded from racism education to anti-oppressive education and awareness of white privilege. White privilege and matters of whiteness (Dyer, 1997; Goodman, 2001; Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 1988; Painter, 2010) are concepts we studied in class, and Drew reflected on his place in society. He explains:

my race has impacted me greatly so far in my journey through life. Being a Caucasian male, some may see me as the norm or the majority of the population. I, however, do not consider myself better or superior than anyone else of a different race. . . Furthermore, a very common stereotype about white people is that we are all rich and are spoiled. However, that is not the case at all. There are impoverished white people, just as there are impoverished people in any other race. Yet, white people seem to never get grouped into that category. I personally hope that in the future there will be no categories, or racial slurs, or stereotypes. In a perfect future, we should all respect each other as if we are one. On the other hand, I have no idea what it is like to be a different race than what I am. For example, in Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird, Atticus says, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (Lee, 30) I really will not be able to understand what it feels like to be a different colour, just as Harper Lee has stated through her novel (Drew, 2011).

Not only is Drew highlighting his understanding of white privilege, he acknowledges that he cannot ever really understand what it is like to be anything other than white. He critiques Lee’s message in To Kill a Mockingbird because he understands “inequalities offered by post-structural theories of power and the subject” (Youdell, 2006, p. 33). Drew’s is critical of the theme presented in To Kill a Mockingbird. In fact it demonstrates, Kumashiro’s (2001) post-structural explanation of the knowledge we gain from any text will always be partial. Such partiality means that, inevitably, the text with reflect the realities of some people but miss those of
others; it will represent the voices of some groups but silence those of others; and in doing so, it will challenge some stereotypes while reinforcing others (p. 7).

Texts will never tell the entire truth but they can be effective tools in hacking away at white privileged roots (Aveling, 2006). In class, we wanted to deconstruct whiteness because it sustains white privilege;

I never really thought about it until this year of what it means to be in the norm or what the social expectations were of me in the world. I learned that being a white male gives me a higher standing than to that of a different race in society and affects me in a positive way because it is considered the norm. I am thus in privileged class. It is considered the norm for a white male to be in charge and because of this marginalizes many other people and racial groups. Thus I was not only able to read the word but the world (Kelly, 2011).

Kelly’s recognition of his white privilege is a substantial step in his acquiring the tools of understanding what an anti-oppressive education offers. White privilege is a social construct with colonial roots (Aveling, 2006; Painter, 2010; Sterzuk, 2011) that is maintained by Eurocentric worldviews and discourses. In recognizing our own racialized identities, we can move beyond the oppressive barriers that inundate literature, classrooms, and society.

Drawing on our study of white privilege and also pastoral pedagogy (Cavanagh, 2001), Devon explains the dangers of the white, pastoral approach;

A major misconception in our society is that white people assume that people from other ethnical [sic] backgrounds require our help. This is not true; it is simply a generalization or stereotype. In my encounters with Habitat for Humanity and working at camp I find myself challenging the way I see others, questioning if the neighbourhood they live in or the school they go to or the job they have or do not define who they really are. When considering these factors I find that I do sometimes judge and that I cannot generalize groups of people by the way they choose to live and what they believe. A great example of the same kind of generalization and stereotyping is found in April Raintree. The social working speaks of what she calls “native girls’ syndrome” (Culleton 48) and the April and her sister will get pregnant and not be able to hold a job, become prostitutes, go to jail and try to get others to pity the two girls. Being involved in
my community is making me aware of the potential there is to alleviate the negativity placed upon some people. Especially the potential I have to educate others in becoming more conscious of the inequalities present in our modern societies (Devon, 2011).

Aveling (2006) suggests there are some necessary components of effective conscious raising that include awareness of first the self and then how the community and backgrounds affect individuals, but also a confrontation with outside perspectives and taking action. Devon demonstrates in her literature study, she reflected on self, and then applied her new knowledge to the community and outside perspectives, engaging her from apathy. As their teacher I was often unsettled while teaching about privilege, because I feared that I could not ensure that students understood white privilege consisted of unearned and conferred dominance (McIntosh, 1988). As demonstrated above, eleventh grade students are capable of comprehending and analyzing white privilege within literary text, the self, and our communities.

Furthering our understanding of oppression and how it operates within society, I introduced the class to Christian privilege. Teaching about Christian privilege in a Catholic high school may appear ironic, possibly subversive, but in my view, so necessary. White, Christian norms inundate culture and society. Christian holidays are officially recognized and celebrated, and prescribe the organization of the school year, even in the public school system. Perhaps this is one of the most neutralized forms of dominance; the fact that all children in Saskatchewan have no school on Sunday, and have extended holidays at Easter and Christmas is never seriously interrogated. It seems normal, neutral, and natural. People who practice other religions or faith traditions have to use personal holidays to celebrate their religious days (Goodman, 2001). Kelly used
his autobiography as an opportunity to reflect on this concept of Christian privilege and how it manifested in his life;

A couple months after I was born I was taken to church to be baptized as a Catholic Christian. Now, since I’ve been around the rituals and traditions of a Christian, it has given me a lot to think about. For example, hearing the same stories now as I did as a child, I am able to give my opinion on it instead of just taking it literally word for word. . . Through my journey of my identity development, I also have had the chance to look at my religion and how I am treated because of the religion I am in. For example, the world revolves around the [Christian] religion because “although Christianity is not, in some sense, the officially recognized religion of Canada today, it continues to enjoy some greater measure of privilege and legal protection than other religious and secular ideologies” (Ogilvie 73). By being a Catholic it has affected me in a positive way by giving me certain privileges. Mainly every holiday in the Catholic religion, is a holiday that everyone gets off work or school around the world and is why it is considered a Christian privilege. . . This ultimately leaves the smaller religions to be pushed aside and not receive the same treatment as Catholics (Kelly, 2011).

Kelly articulates the importance in heightening awareness of Christian privilege. He recognizes the special access often granted to this dominant group and how it creates inequitable opportunities because of the creation of the Christian/non-Christian binary. He provides a concrete example of the affirmation Christians receive and “the denial of advantage often uttered by men and White people in parallel discussions of patriarchy and racism, and correspondingly, male and White privilege” (Clark, Vargas, Schlosser & Allmo, 2002, p. 53). When I first introduced students to the concept of Christian privilege and how it operates in society, they had never heard of it or had never thought about it. Therefore, students were receptive to my justification for why this was another important thread of anti-oppressive education. Kelly was not the only student who expressed recognition of Christian privilege at work.

Through reflection and recollecting personal experiences, students’ beliefs about religion evolved throughout the semester. One example was provided by Jaden;
My opinion on religion changed in the summer of 2010. I went to a new camp with a friend . . . A few nights later we were told that if you failed to go to church every Sunday, were gay, did not ask to be forgiven for your sins, or have not yet accepted God into your life and failed to make up for these things on your death bed you would not go to heaven. I found this odd and contradictory since as children we were taught that God loves everyone and because of the fact that Jesus died we could go to heaven. I had never once heard of this quota you had to fill for God to love you. Yet I decided to focus on other things since all my other friends at camp found it normal and had no problem with it . . . I believe in God, I just do not believe in the rules placed upon your faith by churches . . . [W]hen I first told my mom my new opinion on religion and church I could tell she was shocked. She kept saying things like “I have failed as a parent,” and “Where did I go wrong?” I could not believe she of all people could be so upset over my personal decision. I still believed in God, I just did not want to feel oppressed. (Jaden, 2011).

With my approach to teaching about Christian privilege I used McIntosh’s (1988) “Unpacking the White Knapsack” approach. I simply wanted students to look into themselves and their own lived experience to question: “What do I believe? Who taught me that? Why do I believe this? What would it mean if what I believe was oppressive?”

Through prompting students with some of these questions, I saw that their discussions on Christian privilege clearly demonstrated recognition of unequal power distribution.

Students’ identities are rooted in systems, and at our Catholic school, the roots run deep in systems of Christian privilege. As illustrated in the quotation above, Jaden eloquently provides an anecdote that encompasses Clark, Vargas, Schlosser, and Allmo’s (2002) explanation that our identities are informed by how the world engages us. Denying that privileged identities exist guarantees that these identities will continue to be manifested and will not be disrupted, while others continue to be silenced.

I see merit in a faith-based education, but I will not consciously participate in maintaining silences. I attempted to balance our examination of this aspect of privilege between attacking Christianity and maintaining an open space to “build religiously,
spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive community” (Clark et al, 2002, p. 57) in our classroom. Critically analyzing literature in this spirit supported my efforts. Students maintained their sense that their faith was an important part of their identities, but they became critically conscious of another social norm that produced their identities. Students could recognize dominant discourses of religion in texts, and then could look inward and see the discourses operating in their own lives. Logan writes:

I on the other hand think that religion is one of the most important foundations in life. Without religion, one does not know what to believe, and if one does not know what to believe what do they believe? In the novel, *The Life of Pi*, many insightful views of religion are discussed. A quote from this novel that I can relate to is "I can well imagine an atheist's last words: 'White, white! L-L-Love! My God!'—and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeast less factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, 'Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain,' and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story.” (Martel 64). I agree with Martel’s point of view of the character Pi in this novel, because people always believe in something, and it is a foreign concept to society not to do so. Having faith in something is important in able to view the world. Without faith, it is hard to view the world in different perspectives. Even though I do not agree with some religions practices, I do believe no matter what your religion is, everyone should be treated equally. I believe there is no such thing as a better religion. (Logan, 2011)

In this passage, Logan demonstrates her ability to unpack her knapsack of Christian privilege and shows how she is critically conscious of how the existences of Christian privilege in society “impacts the daily lives of both those with and those without this privilege” (Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 196). Once more, in class, we were able to name an issue and students were able to see it at work.

Devon expresses her understanding of hegemony and how it is maintained and even advanced through dominant discourses. She was attending a Catholic high school, but was not Catholic. It was uncomfortable for her to not be part of the dominant discourse;
Considering that my family is not Christian, school in [Alberta] was completely different than my public school in [British Columbia]. The challenge for me is that “a Christian affiliated school will expect its history and moral codes to be valued and upheld. The grand narrative and other stories ideally lead students to think critically about their own religious traditions or backgrounds” (English 23) because, at the time, I could not relate due to my inexperience with religion (Devon, 2011).

Devon experienced having less social power than Catholic members of her religious school because she was not part of the norm. Nevertheless, she leaves the reader with a very strong comment of hope. She could not relate and she was marginalized until there were opportunities of counterstories and critical conscious-raising. I believe that simply acknowledging privileged and silenced discourses begins the deterioration of oppressive norms.

Another concept I introduced to the class was male privilege. Jaden took the opportunity to discuss this concept and applied it to her own life. She recollects,

[w]hile observing my mother play both the part of a stereotypical mother and father, I constructed the idea that woman and men are equals. I also thought everyone thought the same way as I did, which led me to believe there was no such thing as sexism. I would hear about sexism and think, how could anyone be so narrow minded to believe such a thing? As I got older I would hear guys in my class joke about men being better than woman, or a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Which is what I thought them to be, meaningless jokes with no real value or belief behind them.

I remember in grade eight we were reading *The Giver*, which is essentially About a utopia, and as an assignment we had to create our own utopia with a group. We were given a check list . . . this list included things like free health care, racism, human rights, gender equality, etc. When I suggested we check the gender equality box my group, which was all male apart from me, told me no, because woman did not have the same worth as men. After debating it for a while I knew there was no winning on my own, so we went to ask the male teacher how we could resolve this problem. He simply told us that if the group could not agree then you were to leave the box unchecked. I felt completely defeated; everything I grew up believing had been torn down in a matter of fifteen minutes (Jaden, 2011).
Male privilege is evident and operating in Jaden’s anecdote. In this classroom, there was a denial of oppression. Through denial, the oppression was perpetuated. The creation and reproduction of male privilege is very damaging. Jaden alluded to everything her mother so progressively had taught her was diminished because equity did not exist outside of her home.

In a patriarchal society, I attempted to provide counterstories as an anti-oppressive ELA strategy. Kumashiro’s (2001) different ways of reading texts for different effects is applied here to develop reading texts in anti-oppressive ways. I found it effective, as did Devon. She recalls:

[i]n every piece of literature we encounter in the class, with the exception of Life of Pi, women were the protagonists and were the characters to overcome adversity. In To Kill a Mockingbird, Scout is the one to make a stand about the injustice Tom faces. The Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls finds comfort in a man, her father, but never relies on him, she is independent. In April Raintree, April does everything in her power to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of Métis people. In developing critical reading skills we can learn from all literature. . . I have power to be like every one of these women! Even though I am part of the White privilege class does not mean I must fall under the stereotypes placed upon woman (Devon, 2011).

McIntosh (1988) thinks that whites are not taught to recognize white privilege and males are not taught to recognize male privilege and that the denial protects and maintains both systems of privilege. The maintenance of male privilege can be interrupted through anti-oppressive education, in this case, ELA instruction. There is much work to do, but as the passages of the students’ autobiographies that I have analyzed and presented demonstrate, change can be achieved.

Another term we used in class in our study of racial privilege is what it means to be colorblind and the dangers such an attitude perpetuates. It is dangerous because colorblindness maintains white privilege (Gallagher, 2003). The definition I presented to
the class was to be colorblind allows whites to believe that being non-white has nothing to do with an individual’s or a group’s place in society’s racialized hierarchy and that privilege and position are determined by a system of meritocracy. A belief in meritocracy allows whites to be comfortable in their privilege, fulfills the desire for innocence and neutrality, and eliminates guilt (Gallagher, 2003). In class, we came to believe that being colorblind maintains the bandage over the wound of oppression. Dylan applied this concept to some of his personal experiences by reflecting:

When I was growing up I did not see the human race as, White, Black, Asian, or Aboriginals. They were just humans in my eyes, my parents raised me colorblind. Hoping I would not be racist when I grew up. Growing up I have seen racism everywhere, at school, at work, even just on the streets. At school people avoid other students just because of their color. At my work I believe racism is at its worst. Almost ninety percent of the time, if an Aboriginal walks in they get someone from the store to follow them around the store. . . It is not only workers from my work that uses these stereotypes. I have had customers walk up to me and tell me I should watch that Aboriginal customer. Also White customers treat the aboriginals terribly. There have been White customers who have cut in front of Aboriginals in line at the till . . . Early September this year a man died because no one would let his friend use their phone,

[the man indicated he approached several groups of people near the water. Before a body was pulled from the lake, some onlookers told the Leader-Post that they wondered if the situation might be a hoax. One woman later spoke with Elliott and asked how she knew the man wasn’t lying. The woman said she was afraid the man was trying to steal her phone. (Elliott 1)]

It is sad that even in life or death situation, people still just see stereotypes formed by society. Even if they thought he would steal his phone. They could have at least called 911 themselves just in case he was not telling the truth, which in this case he was telling the truth. I myself would also be less pleased about giving him my phone but I would at least have called for him. Sadly these stereotypes blind the human race; hopefully someday the shutters can be taken off (Dylan, 2011).

Dylan explains that colorblindness does not benefit society. Colorblindness denies that racism does exist, and that race matters. To be colorblind prolongs the silence that
prevents us from addressing racism. To remain entrenched in passivity will prevent moving away from the tyranny of the color-blind.

Jaden reflects on the concept of being colorblind as manifested in her life, as well as the dangers that come with such a position;

Along with being oblivious to sexism I was also blind to racism. Growing up I never really gave much thought to other races or racism. I went to school and was one of the only Caucasian kids; most of my friends growing up were either African American or Aboriginal. I remember watching an episode of That’s so Raven that was about racism and thinking it only existed on TV. Even when I became older I still believed that. It wasn’t until I moved and started going to a new school that I noticed there was separation. The white kids would tend to associate with each other and the colored kids would tend to do the same. I didn’t associate it with racism though, since I didn’t believe it still existed. Then I started high school and that is when racism became apparent. Racial slurs (i.e. the “n” word) and stereotypes placed upon certain races became more apparent. People said these things without even thinking about it. The thing that shocked me the most was the fact that everyone found these things acceptable, and that I was considered weird for thinking they were wrong. However I didn’t really think of it as racist, just the norm, or current slang (Jaden, 2011).

Here Jaden moves from being colorblind to becoming critically aware. She recognizes that racism not only exists, but that it is the norm at school. She is even surprised when she no longer views school with her colorblind lens and sees the enormity of inequity (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010).

Jessie also understands the harm in colorblindness and explains what we all should strive to become critically awake; “[b]eing in a school with many different races has showed me that not all people from a certain race are the same”. I believe that Jessie’s statement also supports that schools are fertile places where anti-oppressive work can really make a difference because teenage learners are open. Devon also discusses her experiences of naivety and lack of awareness;

Awareness is an important component in multi-cultural and anti-oppressive education. I think we notice oppression everyday but we only think about taking
action when an issue occurs. I have to say I am guilty. Being raised by parents who never taught us the differences between the privileged white class and the marginalized, I am not afraid to admit that I can be color blind, meaning that I do not always see the differences in race. This is not a positive concept even though some suggest it is. Without talking about the inequality around me it is hard to build critical thinking skills when faced with a discriminatory situation (Devon, 2011).

Devon touches here on an important point related to Bell’s (2003) explanation that the appeal of colorblindness is rooted in the desire for feeling comfortable and attempting to avoid being or appearing racist – guarding white comfort. I am relieved that in our classroom we could move beyond the normative assumption that seeing or naming racism means that we are being racist (Bell, 2003). If colorblindness existed in our classroom we would never have been able to address racism, issues of unequal power relations, or discrimination (Bell, 2003). Therefore, by naming the issue of colorblindness, we were able to address it.

I believe progress is made when students are aware of how society has shaped them. Student examples provide hope. Jaden elaborates on some of her insights explaining:

[i]n some ways [racism] is forced into society. It is one of the hardest stereotypes to escape. I think Charles Quist-Adade says it best when he says “[i]t is not the nature of whites, but the logic of the system, the rules of the game, if you will, that produce racism.” (Quist-Adale, 4) People may wonder how discovering racism could change my views and outlook on life. Finding out racism actually existed opened my eyes to many other unfair things in our world. Canada is supposed to be the land of opportunity; however, people are bullied and have to earn respect that some people are just given. This does not just apply to racism; it is also relevant with gender, sexual orientation, age and many other qualities that a person should not be judged on.

When I was young I thought I lived in a world full of equal opportunities. However everyday it seems like we are getting farther and farther away from that. I constantly hear about discrimination and hate crimes and it seems like many people just do not even care. Sometimes I wonder if I were a different race, would I still have the same friends? (Jaden, 2011).
Students can and do understand oppression and how it operates and is perpetuated in society. Logan articulates that “society seems to think that if a person is high classed, wealthy, white skinned, Christian and male; life should reward you with all the benefits. These qualities are society’s norms” (Logan, 2011). Not only does Logan understand the inequities in society, she has reflected on our anti-oppressive ELA teachings comprehends anti-oppressive education as “the cultivation of this ability to listen, to treat others personal stories with openness and respect” (Lake, 2010, p. 45). Logan continues:

I believe that by raising awareness about the oppressed is important because in my mind society should be equal, and it is unfair that people have to suffer from others because of their beliefs, race, class and of their personal morals and values. Through my life experiences I have developed an understanding of the world around me, and why people act in a certain way in social situations. I ask myself everyday as to why the oppressed have to suffer from the privileged, and how I myself, can educate others about racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. In my lifetime, I have been influenced greatly by my many external factors that have affected my identity development physically, mentally, socially, religiously and psychologically (Logan, 2011).

When students in the study were able to name the influential factors contributing to their identity development, they moved out from the silent spaces of either the oppressed or the privileged. Students in the class became participants in the conversation. They have been engaged and enraged. Awareness has ignited a movement from passivity to action. Logan expresses this, explaining:

I feel with awareness and support from others society can eliminate judgments and stereotypes that exist in our own neighborhood and all around the world. My mission is to raise awareness about this social norm that has been existing for many centuries’ by breaking down oppressive barriers in society. This can be achieved by developing multicultural events that communicate and educate others about the rising issue of racism (Logan, 2011).

The aspects of the autobiographies that I have analyzed and presented indicate that anti-oppressive education has been effective with these students. Given the same attention and
time, I do not see how the approach and curriculum I created would not work elsewhere. It just has to be tried. I am calling others with similar goals to take up the challenge in their classrooms. It is scary and it is messy, but it can affect change. There will always be more work to do because oppression is not static, nor are the systems which perpetuate oppression. Oppression is remarkably resilient. It evolves, changes, morphs, but there are some fundamental starting points in anti-oppressive education that can provide students and their teachers with a platform to engage in anti-oppressive work. Devon articulates that seeing oppression is the first step;

In order to break down the barriers between classes and races caused by oppression, I must first see the barriers. I have become aware of many inequalities of our societies, those of socio-economics and race is most apparent. But unlike the students Goodman writes about, I do not “rely on race and their sense of White privilege to create separation” (Goodman 23) between myself and the people who do not fit into the privileged white group that I fall under. I have become aware in that sense. I also think I notice the oppression around me every day but do not always choose to take action and speak against the oppression until there is bigger incident, in which case I often feel obliged to say something. I know I have more learning to do; we all do, when it comes to my self-awareness and criticizing my personal values and beliefs about our multi-cultural, oppressive society (Devon, 2011).

Devon encompasses a critical consciousness and a responsibility to continue to step beyond palliative responses to oppression, and reach for an authentic transformation by humanizing our reality (Freire, 1997). The response is anti-oppressive education. It is “the act of love opposing the lovelessness” (p. 27).
5. IMPLICATIONS: MY LEARNING PROCESS AND THE IMPACT ON MY PRACTICE

I have come to further understand that it is the adults who work in education, not the students, who are responsible for the “knowledge” that impacts society. By the time students reach high school, they come to us with strong ideologies and sense of identities. Knowing that students arrive in my classroom with almost fully-developed identities is no excuse for me to avoid taking up anti-oppressive pedagogy. I cannot understand any excuses for not embracing the challenge. As the students in this study have so eloquently shown, teens are fully capable of coming along on the journey of developing a critical-consciousness and questioning what is taught, why that particular knowledge is valued, whose perspective is represented, and challenging the underrepresented voices in our curricula (Bekisizwe, 2010; Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). When the dominant discourses and the players in oppression (we as teachers) can eliminate our fears about dismantling barriers and the collapsing of dominant norms, I believe that society can become freed from oppression. This is not an argument for old scores to be settled, for one group to redress the injustices of the past by assuming positions of power. Anti-oppressive education is the elimination of hegemonic practices, segregation, and biased curriculum content in our classrooms (Bekisizwe, 2010) and for the critical awakening and humanizing of us all.

In the new regime that I propose in this thesis, all students are to be treated equitably in the classroom so that they might develop skills in critical literacy. There will be factors with which we will all be faced with when doing anti-oppressive work. Some of these factors may include: the extent that students are willing to critically read the
literature provided; their possible limitations on pre-requisite critical reading and thinking skills; their possible reluctance to verbalize personal reactions to the text and their selves; limited support from colleagues or administration; and possibly uncomfortable or upset parents or guardians. I encountered several of these factors. We, as teachers, cannot make excuses, for not adopting anti-oppressive education as the foundation for everything we do. To the argument that I often hear, “that it’s too complicated . . . not the right time . . . too dangerous . . . I’m not knowledgeable enough” I say: there will never be an ideal time, or an ideal class, or an ideal school to begin our journey. Before questioning and then challenging students’ thoughts and ideologies, before feelings can be safely expressed through written reflections, before students can engage in critical self-study, and before students can articulate their experiences critically, there must be an established community of respect, safety, and trust (Foss & Carpenter, May 2002; Prater, et.al, 2006). We just need to start.

Critical engagement with differences becomes anti-oppressive education. There are so many ways to do this work. Teachers and students can begin to build “alliances across cultural and racial identity” (St. Denis, 2007). We can “identify ways of interrupting, abiding educational exclusions and inequalities” (Youdell, 2006, p.33). The classroom can be the perfect platform to examine “what stories can teach us about racism” (Bell, 2003). If we are going to support our students in engaging in differences, we need to teach them how to “unpack their invisible knapsacks” (McIntosh, 1988). Once we are honest about our assumptions, we can then begin “disrupting molded images: identities, responsibilities, and relationships” (Dion, 2007). It is important to know and name “privileged groups” (Goodman, 2001) to address issues of oppression. Without this
step, silence in education persists. The silence must be interrupted, and when it is, “extraordinary conversations” (Weis & Fine, 2001) can prevail. All voices need to be respected and heard, because “there are other children here” (St. Denis, 2011). Engaging in these differences in stories, voices, content, methods, and goals is my approach to anti-oppressive education through ELA.

Throughout the entire process of planning, preparing for, and applying this pedagogy, I have learned to never halt in questioning myself. I must continually recognize my biases, state my assumptions, and interrogate what I think I “know,” and be willing and able to place my engrained beliefs aside when a discussion or lesson takes me in a different direction than I had planned, making room for “extra-ordinary conversations” (Weis & Fine, 2001). In addition, I have learned that an examination of the power relations in our classrooms must be explored, beginning now. They exist and are always present. I have learned to name them and to acknowledge them, because then we can address them. In particular, I have learned that power defines the teacher/student relationship. The process of being aware of my position of power has allowed me to act as a facilitator, not as an imposer of the awakening of awareness. As the facilitator, I was conscious not to trivialize, romanticize, or objectify course content. Whereas in past, traditional attempts and practices of anti-oppressive pedagogical approaches have often been reduced to “trivial examples and artifacts of cultures such as eating ethnic or cultural foods, singing songs or dancing” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 61). Exposure to ideas is not enough; immersion in the messy work of change is needed. Students need the space and opportunity to walk around in the big rooms of ideas offered by anti-oppressive education.
5.1 Further Study that the Findings Suggest

My study is an important beginning for me, but also represents a call for more research in the field. Although schools may be successful in many ways, as social institutions, schools remain highly contested spaces of power relations. Kim (2009) presents some of the risks inherent in research that potentially causes more damage than provides solutions. She suggests that researchers must be aware of not continuing the perpetuation of social, political, economic, and educational inequalities. Her anti-oppressive theoretical approach can contribute to providing equitable educational opportunities for disenfranchised students. As a researcher, I am seeking to understand and represent the experiences of my high school students, my valued partners in my own process of change. Therefore, by showing in detail the changes they experienced and constructed with regard to racial attitudes and oppressive beliefs, I believe my study has affected change. I believe language and literacy education is a rich environment with many possible opportunities to achieve anti-oppressive outcomes. But the change does not need to stop here, in a space that many have dismissed as “just the humanities.” I was interested in observing students’ experiences and reflections through the naming of oppression, a critical awakening, and creating urgency in closing the gap of oppression. I have shown that reflection on individual experiences, informed by intentional pedagogical practice, combined with conscious curricular content, geography, history, literacy skills, math and science can be transformed in a way that gives humanness (Lake, 2010) to previously dead or oppressive pedagogy.

Informed pedagogy is influenced by the universities. Universities are centers that use knowledge which has been created and maintained by research (Kovach, 2009).
Therefore, the types of ‘knowledge” that are being observed and recreated through research play a role in either maintaining homogeneous representations or informing “academics to move beyond the binaries found within Indigenous-settler relations to construct new, mutual forms of dialogue, research, theory, and action” (p. 12). Further work could address remaining prevalent issues questioned by Asher (2007) including:

What do we need to do to enable teachers to identify, engage, and unpack nuanced, context-specific differences at the intersections of race, culture, gender, and sexuality that they encounter on a daily basis? How can we foster critical, self-reflexive ways of teaching that promote equity and democratic ways of being? And what are the implications of such social transformation? (p. 66)

Teachers are on the front lines and have all of the resources and answers with them every day – their students. We simply have to be willing to listen.

5.2 Closing Comments: Reaching for Transformation

Multicultural education and anti-oppressive education are not the same type of work. I have been struggling with this distinction from the beginning of my study, perhaps from the beginning of my career. I have always been committed to justice. I do not know if there is a word or term in existence for what I truly mean or what I am truly trying to do. I do not singularly mean multicultural education and I do not only mean anti-oppressive education. I mean a bit of both but not all of both. Some of what is advocated in multicultural policy is attractive to me and makes sense on many levels. The discourse of tolerance in some ways seems possible. But, tolerance is not enough. I literally have been struggling with this since long before I decided to begin graduate studies. I write down ideas all the time that encompass what I am trying to do, but I have
never known what to call it. I have yet to find the words that capture, to my satisfaction, the philosophy of education in which I can live with confidence and in some comfort. This is my final example of irony; despite all of my well-intentioned, and often successful efforts to name something in order to address it, I have not found a name for my struggle. This type of commitment and work is difficult to name. Maybe one exists. But maybe one name is not sufficient for those of us who have chosen this journey. In doing the readings for my research, I must share in Miller’s (2008) closing comment; I am honored to be part of a community of English educators who for the most part critically reflect on their work and, in doing so, develop a desire to bring students along with us, who in turn can embody theory and practice by both speaking and walking the talk in such a way that all of us are transformed. (p. 153)

Can one word capture how understanding systems of privilege, how society operates, how identity affects one's experiences, and how being able to name the issues is the first step in change? Without being able to name the issues, how can we address them, empower students to an awareness to defy passivity and apathy? With this "type" of education, I want students to feel a moral obligation, close a gap, chip away at these oppressive boundaries that continue to separate humanity, to create a sense of urgency, and to create a social awareness. I feel I have a responsibility to create a "voice" to speak against oppression, to provide students with an opportunity for awareness, for growth, for interruption, for togetherness. I wish to humanize what has been dehumanized.
6. REFERENCES


Noyce, P. (Director) (2002). *Rabbit-proof fence* [DVD].


7. APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix A: ELA 20 Autobiography Paper: Anti-Oppressive Education through English Language Arts

A lack of student self awareness is often evident with high school students and their concepts of race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Bullying is one direct result of this. A senior English Language Arts (ELA) classroom can be an effective avenue to implement and conduct anti-racist and anti-oppressive education, utilizing autobiography to reflect a heightened awareness in student attitude, and to promote change. Through the implementation of writing the autobiography, documentation of any changes will be seen through students’ personal reflections on racial attitudes from prior to exposure of a multicultural ELA unit of study, building towards a more in depth understanding or heightened awareness over the semester.

Ultimately, there seems to be more evidence suggesting minor acceptance of differences than equitable educational opportunities. Several studies (Walton, 2005; Cook, 1996; Dei, 2007; Leonardo, 2009; Pennycook, 1989) suggest and discuss these inequalities within our classrooms. In fact, there are more serious implications in the findings. On the one hand, the unnamed norm oppresses differences and multicultural groups. Therefore, systems of privilege are maintained by individuals’ differences and language education is one of these major areas. Therefore, the autobiographical narrative provides students with “opportunities to present their awareness of the social and political realities in their lives, their sorrows, frustrations, and anger” (Cook, 1996, p. 77). This is a way students can begin to use their language background and “native knowledge of languages other than English [to] provide a special opportunity in the study of literature as well as in writing” (p. 103).

This approach is needed in teaching English, because often times, we don’t acknowledge that “living with a certain kind of difference is one of its great strengths” (Peel, 2000, p. 33). Tuman suggests that texts can introduce new and alternative ways to understanding one’s self and the world. Literacy can create a way to “be” in this world, and it is a way of comprehending and critically thinking about how this world works. An ability to live with the other, to live as one, can be accomplished through language education that prioritizes and recognizes differences, instead of the focus on hegemonic-oppressive practices we are still seeing today.

The narrative/autobiographical research process captures individual uniqueness. It centralizes the relationship between the individual and the wider structures of society that we take for granted - structures such as practices or cultural features of our everyday world. Narrative and telling our story is in the way we live –people like to share who they are in order to enrich our human experience. However, narrative research helps call into question how the narratives of the dominant do not match the experience of all persons (Creswell, 2010; Moen, 2006; Richmond, 2002). Narrative provides an account of those persons whose lives and histories go unheard or unseen.
ELA 20 Curriculum Objectives (English language arts: a curriculum guide for the secondary level, 1997):

Multicultural Content, Perspectives, and Resources

A multicultural perspective should permeate the English language arts program. An "authentic unity" that reflects all peoples’ experiences--not just the traditional Anglo-Saxon one--should be reflected in the program. Some guidelines follow.

- A multicultural perspective addresses the major cultural groups in a country.
- Students should be given opportunities to learn about "concepts--such as immigration, intercultural interactions, and racism--using various groups and their experiences as the vehicle to explore them" (Willis, 1993, p. 2).
- The program should help students see historical events from a variety of perspectives. Students should understand the social, economic, and cultural history of "people", not just military heroism or campaigns.
- The program should reflect an awareness of stereotyping and generalization. It should underscore "the differences between characteristics of groups and the behavior of individuals" (Willis, 1993, p. 3). For example, many Acadians speak French but some do not. Many Aboriginal people speak an Aboriginal language (e.g., Saulteaux) but many do not.
- The program should also reflect an awareness that class, gender, region, and religion all influence individuals and that there is a fine line between generalizing and stereotyping. "Identities are multiple; they can be fluid and complex" (Banks, 1993, p. 3).
- The literature of an English language arts program provides a unique means of exploring vicariously the spectrum of human experience. Culturally relevant literature can be an important tool for developing student literacy. It is particularly important for students from minority groups to see their lives and experiences reflected in literature.
- Choosing literature that is representative of diverse cultural backgrounds requires sensitivity and an awareness of potential cultural and gender bias.

Common Essential Leanings

- Students use language as an instrument of thought.
- Students think reflectively, critically, and creatively.
- Students generate and evaluate ideas, processes, and products.
- Students listen, read, and view analytically and critically.
- Students make and justify decisions.
- Students pose questions and seek clarification.
- Students recognize bias and fallacies.
- Students understand the importance of social responsibility and personal integrity in the use of language.
- Students recognize how stereotypical views can lead to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices.
• Students explore the range of human virtues: those common or unique to different cultures, those which have remained constant, and those which have changed through the ages.
• Students understand self and society more completely.
• Students realize that literature enriches and broadens the experiences of life, including one’s personal and social understanding and responsibilities.
• Students respect cultural perspectives that differ from their own.

Leaning Objectives:

Write to:

• Recognize writing as a process of constructing meaning for self and others.
• Achieve unity of thought and purpose.
• Analyze and evaluate their own and others’ writing for ideas, organization, sentence clarity, word choice, and mechanics (i.e., capitalization, punctuation, and spelling).
• Write for a variety of purposes including to: reflect, clarify, and explore ideas, express understanding, describe, narrate, inform, and persuade, express self
• Present point of view in a personal or reflective essay.

Read to:

• Relate literary experience to personal experience.
• Read an increasingly wide range of material for personal enjoyment and extension of experiences.
• Explore human experiences and values reflected in texts.
• Test ideas and values against ideas in text.
• Make and defend an informed critical response

The Assignment:
Throughout our thematic unit called “Recollections- A Journey Back”, with a multicultural approach, we have conducted literature study, cultural study, racial knowledge study, historical study, curriculum study, self awareness, and personal reflection study. Now I want to know your thoughts, reactions, and narratives. You will be writing an autobiography. Organize your paper around yourself and your thoughts, recollections, and experiences that have developed you from childhood. You may reflect on:

• thoughts of racial identities and how that impacts the way you see and interact with the world.
• yourself and you may articulate any struggles, epiphanies, growth, enlightenment, changes of attitudes, hardening of attitudes, or any thoughts on their racial attitudes and identities that have been developed and shaped from your childhood experiences and educational experiences.
• literature, significant quotations, class discussions, journal entries, or any relevant experiences from the unit that impacted you in some way.
Works Cited


Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for the High School Students and Parents/Guardians Agreeing to Participate in the Project

University of Regina
Faculty of Education

Participant Consent Form

Add Date:

Project Title: Multicultural Education and Anti-Oppressive Education through English Language Arts

Researcher: Chauntel Baudu, ELA teacher, Graduate student, Curriculum and Instruction, University of Regina, 791-7240, c.baudu@rcs.sk.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Valerie Mulholland, Language and Literacy, Faculty of Education, val.mulholland@uregina.ca

Dear Students/Parents & Guardians,

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores multicultural and anti-oppressive education within a grade 11 (ELA 20) classroom. A senior English Language Arts (ELA) classroom can be an effective avenue to implement and conduct anti-racist and anti-oppressive education. This research is a qualitative, narrative-based study. In the proposed research, I will ask students to use a multicultural approach throughout our literature study, poetry analysis, research, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing.

This research project has several objectives:
- Consider reflections on a possible heightened awareness in student attitude – self critique
- To promote change, through student thoughts and actions
- Develop a personal autobiography as a final writing assessment piece after the unit of study
- Document any changes seen through students’ personal reflections on racial attitudes and systems of privilege from exposure to a multicultural and anti-oppressive ELA unit of study
- Build towards a more in depth understanding or heightened awareness over the semester
- Meet ELA 20 learning objectives determined by the Ministry of Education (see Appendix A)

We will use the following procedures:
The procedures which will take place within the classroom are first and foremost designed to effectively meet the objectives of the ELA 20 curriculum. Through the use of teaching and implementing critical reading strategies, critical thinking skills, and background content instruction on multicultural and anti-oppressive education, the procedures are designed to develop aware, confident, and competent language users. As stated in the Government of Saskatchewan’s
Core Curriculum Guidelines, “multicultural education is an interdisciplinary educational process that fosters understanding, acceptance, empathy, and constructive and harmonious relations among people of various cultures. It encourages learners of all ages to view different cultures as a source of learning and enrichment” (2007, p.9). The final writing assessment will be an autobiography. All students will write this assessment piece, but with signed consent, I will use the students’ papers to study and analyze student attitudes and reflections on this multicultural and anti-oppressive unit. The study will take place within class time. At any time, please feel free to call or email me with any questions regarding the procedures of the study or your/the student’s role: Chauntel Baudu, 791-7240, c.baudu@rcs.sk.ca.

**Confidentiality:** Refers to procedures used by the researcher at all stages of the project to protect participants’ identity.

In order to ensure confidentiality for the participants, I will have students submit consent forms to the secretary who will keep them safely filed in the office until the marks are submitted. I will then return the autobiography papers to any students who may not have given consent. The other papers will be locked in a cabinet during all times, when not being used by me. Also, during the write up of my thesis, I will use pseudonyms (false names).

Accordingly, I will comply with the Research Ethics Board requirement that data be archived for a minimum of three (3) years. All the data will be stored on a flash memory stick. The information will be password protected. In the event that I write a scholarly paper about the research, I will provide you with an electronic link to the paper if it is published. After three years, I will delete the data files and shred the papers.

I am available to answer questions that you may have regarding the procedures and goals of the study. Neither you nor your family will be identified to protect your identity.

**Right to Withdraw:**
Your participation is voluntary and you can reflect on or write about only those areas that you are comfortable with or interested in. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort, even after you have signed the consent form. Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position, class standing, or how you will be treated. Nor will anyone know who is or is not participating, other than the participant. Should you wish to withdraw, you will still need to attend lessons, do daily exercises and assignments, and write the autobiography. Your paper will be graded by me, and at this time I will have no knowledge of who has given consent or not, marks submitted, and then returned to the student, as we do with all other major writing assignments.

**Ethics Approval:** This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If research subjects have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as subjects, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.
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<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Parent/Guardian</th>
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*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
7.3 Appendix C: Research Ethics Board Approval Memo

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 4, 2011

TO: Chauntel Baudu
5028 Primrose Lane
Regina, Sk  S4X 4C7

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Multicultural and Anti-Oppressive Education through English Language Arts
(File # 1231112)

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

☐ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F). ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Valerie Mulholland – Faculty of Education

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca

Phone: (306) 585-4775
Fax: (306) 585-4695