Autism Assessment Referral: A Mother's Experience

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Abstract

In this paper I engage in an autobiographical inquiry into my experience of my son's autism assessment referral and how this experience has continued to guide me in my learning journey as a mother, educator, friend, and family member. Thinking about how a parent's greatest gift in this world is their children, I inquire into the messiness of life-making that occurs when parents are informed by a school specialist that their child should undergo an autism assessment. I share my experiences as a parent receiving information.

Introduction

I come to this work as a mother, friend, educator, and community member. I am a K–12 educator and school administrator who has held leadership roles in inclusive education. This paper is grounded in my experiences as a parent to two beautiful children alongside my partner. Being a parent has been the most educative and rewarding experience[1] in my life, but it has also come with many challenges and disruptions (Caine et al., 2022). These experiences have led me to wonder in my role as a parent and educator: How might school teams come alongside families and students in ways that are guided by "relational ethics" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 30)?

In narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2016) describes relational ethics as the "commitment to relationships, that is, to live in collaborative ways" and this requires attending to the "social responsibilities regarding how we live in relation with one another" (p. 30). It can lead to new opportunities for learning and imagining ways of engaging with others, as described by Dr. Vera Caine: "I don't think that relational ethics asks us to give up our beliefs… but living relational ethics asks us to do more in other ways, to open up to possibilities in order to live alongside" (Clandinin et al., 2019, p. 305).

This understanding of relational ethics in narrative inquiry resonated with me as I began to wonder about the possibilities of the ways school teams could come alongside families and students when sharing potentially uncomfortable information. This includes assessment referrals[2] and how these experiences could be guided by attentiveness to the stories and experiences of others. How could this inform and shape future experiences and life transitions of families, students, and school team members if it was grounded in relational ethics? I wondered and thought about this question when I was informed that our son should be assessed for autism. It was an experience that has greatly impacted my life since; it is ongoing and ever-present. A single phone call has shaped our family's future experiences—in ways I could not comprehend or was willing to attend to because of the pain it caused. This illuminated the ways in which unexpected information can demonstrate the messiness that can occurs from human interaction.

My conceptualization of "messy" and "messiness" for this manuscript is my experience as a parent when I received unexpected information about an autism diagnosis referral for my son Carter and the implications of this experience thereafter. As described by Hasnat and Graves (2000), "'disclosure,' the first communication of a diagnosis of disability in a child to the parents, is an experience which is often never forgotten" (p. 32). Further, because of experiencing this "unexpected and unfamiliar territory," parents may feel uncertain and "perplexed by new stages and challenges along the way" (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022, pp. 2–3). Guided by this, the usage of the word "messy" includes the unexpected and unpredictable life transitions where I am alongside Carter in navigating the life events that have followed from this assessment referral: the administration of an autism assessment, Carter's schooling journey and community engagement, and facing the dominant narrative in society that Carter must work towards being "normal" (Kunc, 2000, p. 10).

I have come to understand narrative inquiry as the study of human experience that attends to the "richness and expression" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. xxvi) of lived experience as "storied phenomena" (Swanson, 2019, p. ii). Narrative inquirers begin with autobiographical narrative inquiry because it provides an opportunity for the researcher to "inquire into and retell earlier stories" (Swanson, 2019, p. 14). I selected an autobiographical narrative inquiry as an "appropriate avenue into my experiences" as a mother, educator, and friend, to assist me in making meaning of my experiences (Cardinal, 2011, p. 80). I inquired into my experiences that followed an autism assessment disclosure for my son Carter and this manuscript will share my new learnings, including becoming more "wide awake"[3] (Greene, 1995). I invite you to join me on this journey to tell and retell.[4]

Methods

I am grateful for the guidance and opportunities to learn from Indigenous scholars and mentors in my journey as a beginning narrative inquirer. The autobiographical works of Cree/Métis scholar Dr. Trudy Cardinal and Métis scholar Dr. Cindy Swanson guide me in my understanding of coming to this methodology. I have learned about the many ways to come to data in narrative inquiry through field texts which "are composed from conversations, interviews, and participant observations, as well as from artifacts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 3). In this inquiry, I attended to the "three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry" which includes temporality, sociality, and place while drawing on multiple field texts (course writings, research proposal writing, and presentation transcripts) (Lessard, 2014, p. 31). Through these field texts, I inquired into my experiences through an autobiographical narrative inquiry by reading, rereading texts, and watching video recordings of presentations where I was a guest speaker.

Thinking with Course Writings[5]

Throughout my Master's and PhD programs, I have often revisited my experiences alongside Carter in my course writings and assignments. These experiences include sometimes being removed from key conversations regarding Carter's programming where I was informed of the decisions that had been made by the school team for him. Writing about these experiences brought new questions to the surface, leading me to be curious if I was misunderstood by school teams as Carter's mom and wondering if institutional narratives framed my engagement in schools as a parent. This thinking took place through short noting taking, journaling, and reflections during my morning runs.

In turning toward the autism assessment referral, I recalled the events of that day in my writing and I reflected on how this experience has shaped who I am today as an educator, parent, and community member. This included reflective journals, Winter Count,[6] sketch notes, literacy reflections, and critical course Connections & Constructions papers. I inquired into this data by thinking with these stories alongside the scholarship and structures of my courses, connecting educational theory to my experiences and thinking with this experience in connection to issues in education today. Looking across these course writings, I have come to know how my experiences have shaped the ways I story myself as a parent and educator at that time, unveiling new learnings for me as a parent about school processes and interactions. While this inquiry is very much part of my autobiographical beginnings, my children are aware of and approve of me inquiring into our experiences of living alongside one another. Further, I have obtained ethics approval from the University of Alberta for my larger doctoral research which my autobiographical narrative beginnings fall under.

Thinking with Research Proposal Preparation

Even in the very first draft of my PhD research proposal, my intentions and goals of my program were grounded in my experiences as a parent, in particular, my life-making as Carter's mom. I wrote about memories of moments with Carter and his sister Zoe. It was important to include the events of when I was informed that Carter was being referred for an autism assessment. I re-visited and wrote about this experience at length in my proposal, to make connections with decision-making and inclusive education practices at school and how I had felt in my relationship with school teams at that time. Moreover, the ways our stories as a family were excluded from these decision-making conversations demonstrates the unpredictability and messiness of human interaction. It helped me inquire into the dominant social and institutional narratives in society and deepened my understanding of the "life identities, stories to live by" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 146); additionally, it allowed me to see how these stories are "conflicting stories" and "bump"[7] against the dominant narratives which shape how Carter and I are sometimes storied in school and community landscapes (Clandinin, 2016, p. 87).

Thinking with Presentations as a Parent and Educator

Over the past four years, I have presented at multiple teacher conventions in Alberta and as a guest lecturer for pre-service teacher courses at the University of Alberta. The common theme in these presentations was my life experiences as Carter's mom and the tensions and challenges that occur when our stories of home bump against school stories (Clandinin, 2016). In preparing for these presentations, I combined theory and my lived experiences to illuminate to the audience the social and personal pressures parents of children with disabilities can experience—especially when the attitudes and beliefs of others are guided by the "medical model of disability" (Chipchar & Rohaytn-Martin, 2021). I have sat with the presentation transcripts and Zoom video recordings as a form of reflection. What I have discovered from my inquiry is that audience members' questions have opened me to new understandings, helping me think more deeply about Carter's assessment disclosure; specifically, how I would have wanted the disclosure to have taken place if I could go back in time. The pause I hear on the recording, the way I see my head tilting downward on the screen as I think about the question, prompted me to wonder and inquire into these tensions to understand more about the messiness and complexities of human interaction.

Evidence from Zoom recordings and Presentation Transcripts

> If you could go back, how would you want this information to have been shared with you? (Audience member question, Winter 2023)
>
> How should school teams share this information, or even begin the conversation with families? (Audience member question, Winter 2024)
>
> The neglect of parent knowledge and dominance of school teams; there may not be an appreciation for the unique position a family has in caring for their child. (Presentation statement, Fall, 2024)
>
> Past experiences do influence the way I see the world today, the rhythm of the life that we have alongside Carter and school teams. (Presentation statement, Fall 2024)

Re-visiting the Past

The Phone Call

When a parent is informed that their child may have a disability, it can be a difficult experience because "the manner of the disclosing professional can have a direct impact upon the parents" (Hasnat & Graves, 2000, p. 32). One month before Carter's third birthday, he was enrolled in Program Unit Funding (PUF), an Alberta program that provides interventions and supports for students with severe developmental delays (Alberta Education, 2015). The phone call took place in the fall of his second year, and even today, when I see the school division number appear on my caller ID, there is a tightness in my stomach and my heart flutters. A single phone call had, and continues to have, an immense impact on the ways I live in this world as a mom, friend, and educator.

"Hello, Mrs. Ouellette. My name is …"

> *"Mom!"*
>
> *I quickly turn from the kitchen counter where I am cutting oranges to see my two-year-old daughter Zoe standing in the kitchen doorway, holding a stuffed bunny, her big, brown eyes focused on me.*
>
> *"Grandma have snack too."*

She reminds me that Grandma should eat with them. I hear Grandma's laughter from the living room where they sit with Carter playing cars.

"Yes, of course, I will make Grandma a snack."

Finding my response satisfactory, Zoe flashes me a quick smile and runs back into the living room to play. Her dark curly hair flows behind her. I look out our kitchen window: the sun is shining, and it is a beautiful day.

We have just returned from an appointment for Carter and are now getting ready to eat a quick snack before going to the park. My thoughts wander to my Grade 4 classroom and the substitute. I often find myself torn between leaving the students and not attending appointments for Carter. I wonder if I will ever find this balance.

The sun shines in through the patio doors onto the wooden kitchen table, bringing light into the small kitchen. Suddenly, my phone rings and I see Carter's school division number on my caller ID. I place the knife down next to the plate of oranges and answer.

"Hello?"

"Hello, may I please speak with Mrs. Ouellette?"

"Yes. This is she."

"Hello, Mrs. Ouellette. My name is …"

They continue to inform me of their job title and then say it is their professional judgment that Carter undergo an autism assessment.

I feel as though the air has been sucked from my lungs, my skin feels irritated, and there is a loud whooshing sound in my ears. I am asked if I have any questions. I struggle to find my voice. Forcing myself to take a breath of air, I am able to respond with "No" and hang up the phone.

3:58… 3:58… while staring at this number on my phone, the length of the conversation, a wave of emotions floods through my body. In three minutes and fifty-eight seconds, my body became disconnected from me, moving sharply from happy and content to fear, guilt, anger, and sadness. My hands begin to tremble and I set the phone on the counter near the oranges. Looking up, I stare at the sunshine out the window, so warm and pleasant moments before, now distant and cold.

"Mom!"

Zoe pulls me from the sinking hole I am falling into, deep, dark, and devastating.

"Can we eat?"

Her brown eyes lock with mine, curious and bright.

Mentally, I force myself to smile.

"Sure. I'll be right there."

I carefully place each orange slice on the blue plate and slowly walk into the living room. What does this mean for Carter? Will he be okay? What about Zoe? As I set the plate down for Carter and Zoe, Grandma sees my face.

> *She tilts her head towards me, leaning in.*
>
> *"Are you okay?"*
>
> *Slowly I can feel the dam breaking.*
>
> *"No. I need a minute, can you watch them for a second?"*
>
> *She nods yes and I begin to walk back into the kitchen, tears streaming down my face. I open the door to the backyard and step onto the wood deck. My eyes well with large tears, falling, hitting the sun-bleached boards with small taps.*
>
> *Tap…*
>
> *Tap…*
>
> *Tap…*
>
> *The feelings of fear, anger, and sadness overwhelm me; I fall apart completely.*
>
> (Personal research journal entry, Winter 2024)

Reflecting on this experience, I can remember feeling many emotions. As I pay more attention to how my body responded to this conversation, I wonder if it was a result of how I storied[8] myself as Carter's mother. During my pregnancy I would daydream about him. What would his favorite food be, or color? Would Carter grow up to be a teacher like me? Play a musical instrument like his dad? Would our home be a place where Carter brings his friends after school? In this experience, I felt that relational ethics was broken, disconnecting me from the school team as a parent. I was shocked, taken aback by the information that seemed to be dominated by a narrative of school, excluding our stories of home and the ways Carter is in this world that may not be seen on school landscapes. Such terrifying information was delivered in a short, concise way; absent of relationships or even a warm cup of tea. I felt silenced as a parent, unable to advocate for Carter. Why autism? Who have they already spoken to about this before calling me that day? Was I the last to know?

The word "autism" was not part of my family vocabulary at that time. The only experience I had with individuals diagnosed with autism was students in classes I had taught who often required high levels of support. The ways I had imagined the rhythm of my relationship with Carter as his mom disintegrated because I did not know what would happen next. My transition into this next stage of change with my family was filled with uncertainty. This is what scared me the most; the ways I had imagined coming alongside Carter as his mom and the rhythm of our relationship together may now be different than what I had daydreamed long ago while folding newborn baby clothes in the freshly painted baby room. As I inquired into this experience, my research puzzle began to take shape. I wondered what had not been attended to when this decision was made in school and why did I respond with fear and anger? My research puzzle is my own inquiry where tensions occur when an autism assessment referral disclosure is made by a school specialist to me as a parent.

A Mother's Tensions and Retelling

Fear and Society

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) remind me of the educative practice of retelling an experience. They write "the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change" and to "make sense of life as lived" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 71, 78). I see now the possibilities of retelling this story through an autobiographical narrative inquiry framework and have learned from this retelling that I was most fearful of what others would think of Carter and that this thinking would be shaped by the larger social narrative of what it means to be "normal" (Swanson, 2014). In the exploration of this experience, I returned to the stories of our family. The imagining of what Carter's life would be like, who he would be, and then the tensions I felt when the disclosure occurred. Inquiring into this experience through autobiographical narrative inquiry has assisted me with new understandings of breaking away from the fear that I felt at the time.

Travelling back to this memory, I realized I had already decided who Carter would be prior to the phone call. I had storied him through a lens of my own lived experiences and what society portrays as normal, being able to fit in. The work of Clandinin (2016) helped guide my thinking about the greater institutional, social, cultural, and familial narratives. She writes, "I thought about the ways in which we experience school shapes, and are shaped by family stories, embedded within dominant social, institutional, and cultural narratives" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 74). Chipchar and Rohatyn-Martin (2021) compare the two predominant models of disability: the medical model and the social model. The medical model of disability portrays the individual as the reason for their disability and the tensions or challenges that they may experience. In contrast, in the social model of disability, barriers are present within society and not the person. As an educator, I've seen that both these models of disability are present within school landscapes. For example, referring to a student through the lens of their disability and not their name ("Oh, the autistic kid in Mrs. Smith's class") reinforces the medical model of disability. The social model of disability includes solution-focused conversations regarding barriers within the school landscapes of individuals with disabilities and how to remove these barriers. In thinking about the greater institutional and social narratives, I began to be more awakened (Greene, 1995) to the ways I responded out of fear—fear of the medical model of disability as a way Carter could be storied by educational professionals and an ableist worldview[9] from society itself. I feared society would view Carter as broken, needing to be fixed.

I recall my questions and worries during that time: Will others understand Carter? What will they think of him? Will his teachers provide him with the education and supports he needs? What will our relationships be like with school teams? In bringing these wonders forward, I began to see the fear I felt from my own past experiences in school growing up where students with disabilities were placed in an isolated class. Further, the fear and uncomfortableness I have seen as a school administrator when teachers are informed a student with a disability will be in their class. As a teacher and school administrator, I had seen how students who are identified with a disability may be discussed through the lens of their diagnosis and not as a person. I see now my fear of Carter being at the center of these conversations, the fear of autism being spoken of before himself as an individual.

Single Stories of Autism and Schools

When we shared with others that Carter was undergoing an autism assessment, the responses were normally of pity or silence—sometimes followed with comments "well at least he has you" or "he doesn't look autistic." It was as if I had made them uncomfortable with this information. It led me to wonder, why is autism overshadowing who Carter is as a person even before the diagnosis occurs? How can others see Carter as himself and not autism first?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) speaks of the "danger of a single story," which can lead to "critical misunderstanding." In her work, Adichie (2009) draws attention to how an individual or community can be framed within a single story by others, by way of assumption, pity, patronizing, and default position. Through this inquiry, I began to understand why I felt tension and sadness when Carter was diagnosed with autism. I was afraid that Carter would be pushed aside by others and society, and only seen or understood as autistic. I am reminded by Adichie (2009) of the ways single stories can come forward from the unknown or the unexperienced, in our case stereotypes of individuals living with autism through an ableist lens. I will admit that the comments and physical responses from others when hearing Carter was being assessed for autism angered me. This inquiry has assisted me in understanding my own response and gaining a greater perspective of others. How could they respond to such information when I had not shared my own understanding with them? Were they responding in the manner they had in an effort to not add stress to an already delicate situation? I understand now I feared that others would story Carter as a burden on society, stemming from the single story of autism that can come from stereotypes grounded in the medical model of disability (Chipchar and Rohatyn-Martin (2021). As we move forward, we do not frame Carter within a single story as a family because autism does not define who he is. It is a part of him as an individual. I see now that the unknown can grow seeds of assumptions and pity as described by Adichie (2009), because once others remember that Carter is still here and that autism has not replaced the sweet, kind young boy that he is, then the single stories begin to shift and change—and are replaced with love.

Through this inquiry, another single story (Adichie, 2009) came to mind, a story that is grounded in school landscapes and shaped how I storied myself as Carter's mom. From the assessment disclosure experience, I felt tension in my interaction with school teams, and this was very visible and present during Individualized Program Planning (IPP) meetings for Carter at school.[10] While schools were places where I felt excitement and confidence as a school administrator, as a parent I now felt unsure and guarded. I was afraid and wanted to avoid communication with school staff. Was I angry with school teams? Why did I have these responses and reactions walking into Carter's school? In inquiry, I discovered my responses stemmed from broken trust, anxiety, and frustration that resulted from how the assessment referral had been shared. Through my learning, I have discovered "communicating our expectations is brave and vulnerable, and it builds meaningful connections" (Brown, 2021, p. 47). As time has passed, I have become more vocal in school meetings to advocate not only for Carter, but for myself. From my learning, I now have a deeper understanding of the messy uncomfortableness that comes with communication and life transitions. The way I have storied myself has shifted to a more collaborative, confident approach, including caring communication and, most importantly, centering the gifts of Carter as an incredible human.

World-Travelling with Love

I have often spoken of "The Phone Call" at conferences and consultations with school teams. During this inquiry, I thought of the specialist and their role in school landscapes. Sharing student information or referral recommendations can be part of this role. Simple, straightforward, is it not? At first, yes, I believed it was. I felt that I was impacted, Carter was impacted, and our family was impacted. Looking into the past, we had been taking Carter to specialists to determine the best "ways" to support him in his growth and development since he was two years old. I have sat in many meetings with strangers telling us all the things Carter cannot do; rarely were these meetings grounded in his strengths. It was exhausting and heartbreaking as a parent when I received the phone call from the school specialist. I wonder if the metaphorical wall that I had been attempting to build to protect my heart from these conversations and meetings regarding Carter's abilities had finally collapsed.

Thinking more deeply about this experience led me to recognize I was not the only person who was part of that phone call. I wondered about the school specialist, and Lugones's (1987) work helped me unpack the tensions I felt. She describes travelling with loving perception in connection with her own mother:

> Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world. Only through this travelling to her "world" could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her. (p. 8)

Lugones (1987) goes on to write that travelling to another's world "enables us to be through loving each other" (p. 8). In my learning through this autobiographical narrative inquiry, I became more aware of how I had removed any possibility of travelling with loving perception to the world of the school specialist (Lugones, 1987). I was angry, hurt, and fearful for Carter. These emotions had overtaken me like a rockslide from my collapsing wall. I was angry with the specialist because of the information they shared and how they shared it.

Now, I have learned of the freeness of a "loving attitude" when travelling to another's world, or worlds (Lugones, 1987, p. 15). I wonder how the specialist may have felt that day before picking up the phone: Did they sit with butterflies in their stomach and stare, as I have as a school administrator before making a phone call to a parent? Did they expect me to shout, yell and call them names? Have they been received in such a way by parents before? Were they under pressures to follow policy and procedures of the dominant narratives in schools? I wondered about the weight that can come with delivering information that the listener may not want to hear. Initially, upon returning to this experience and inquiring into it, I did not travel to the specialist's world with loving perception (Lugones, 1987). They shared this information with me because it was their professional role and responsibility to do so. I now experience the freeness of imagining new possibilities of coming alongside school teams who are part of Carter's life; I understand the importance of wonder and travelling with loving perception with others. Of moving slowly with care, because we are all human.

Learning From Each Other

In coming alongside parents and children who are diagnosed with autism, I acknowledge the incredible value of training and professional learning. For this manuscript, I want to turn towards the learning that may not come from a book or program; the ways we can learn from one another through life experiences and sharing. Learning alongside one another can create opportunities for the greatest connections, and in education, the late professor bell hooks (2010) argues, "I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we don't know" (p. 10). I appreciate the moments when staff express that they are uncertain or that they feel vulnerable in their understanding of autism and, importantly, their understanding of who Carter is as an individual. In his work, Dr. Barry Prizant (2022) recounts his learning from a parent of a child who has been diagnosed with autism. The parent described the "got it" factor in how they have observed the relational connections between school staff and their child: "'We say people have "got it,"' she said. No matter their title, no matter their training, they connect… they are eager to learn, and they seek support and advice from a parent or someone else who knows the person well" (p.149). For me as a parent and in reflection of what I've learned through this inquiry, individuals who "got it" are willing to learn even in those moments where learning can be uncomfortable. This is sometimes the most difficult work as educators because it is internal, relational work. The internal work is to engage in critical thinking, to question one's language and how it reflects one's beliefs and values. As described by hooks (2010), "The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works" (p. 7). It is leaning into discomfort through learning and in connection with students who are diagnosed with autism and their families because it builds the foundation for relationships.

Sharing our stories and lived experiences can help support learning in relational ways because "knowledge acquisition comes to us in daily life through conversations" (hooks, 2010, p. 44). Two powerful resources to support this relational work are families and students. Their stories are powerful and for someone seeking to build relationships with families and their children, it can create learning opportunities for learning through listening (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022; Hayward, 2025). Parents are a key resource because they are experts in their child and know their child best; as described by Dr. Denyse Hayward, "Parents are an untapped resource for educators" (Personal communication, January 29, 2025). A simple phone call or sharing a cup of tea can create beautiful learning moments. I think of one experience where a staff member invited me to have a cup of tea with them. In our conversation, they asked for advice on how they could support Carter with his writing as he fatigued quickly. This simple, relational gesture filled my heart with gratitude because they took the time to connect with me as Carter's mom, were curious, and honored my parental knowledge.

In turning towards Carter, I appreciate the relational approach of the staff who have asked him what he would prefer in his learning and spend time with him engaging in an activity he enjoys, such as looking for tadpoles or making popcorn. According to Prizant (2022), the most meaningful learning experiences about autism come from children because it is important "to be present and to listen, to acknowledge and validate (the child's) feelings" and then make changes to our behavior as a result (p. 32). After all, "our attitudes about and perspective on autistic people and their behavior make a critical difference in their lives—and ours" (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2022, p. 32). By listening to and learning from Carter, school staff have shared that they are much more confident in their ability to support him at school in ways that are engaging and help Carter grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Through this relational approach, educators can learn from these experiences, which can lead to shifts in professional practices and reshape the way they view their relationship with families and students.

Looking Forward: Disclosure through Relational Ethics

From this inquiry and my new understandings, I began to wonder about a "forward-looking story" of approaching relationships with parents and students through relational ethics (Nelson, 1999, p. 17). Nelson (1999) describes forward-looking stories as "action-guiding"; our past stories provide explanations of the present and how we might move forward (p. 17). I acknowledge the messiness that can come when a family receives unexpected information about their child, even if the information is shared with good intentions. What if we open ourselves to possibilities in education that create opportunities to be alongside each other in ways that are grounded in relational ethics, to move slowly alongside families in ways that remove assumptions? Guided by this, I imagine forward-looking stories where assessment disclosures and possible discomforts are supported through authentic relationships led by the heart and grounded in relational ethics. I imagine future school teams who will enter Carter's life and our life as his family. School teams who will partner authentically with me when I am advocating for Carter and listen with care during moments of misunderstandings. Shifting the dominant narrative of an ableist society to move and act with love, reciprocity, and respect centers the gifts of all children. I smile when I imagine this forward-looking story.

Notes

1. Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard (2022) discuss the works of philosopher John Dewey in connection to experience as "a source of knowledge" that is "always evolving and that experience builds upon experience" (p. 15). From this, I understand experience as ongoing and interactive; experiences shape future experiences and "attending to experiences can change the stories we tell and live" (p. 26). As an educator, parent, and friend, this understanding of experience has assisted me in the ways I navigate my life experiences by slowing down and bringing past experiences alongside present ones and looking towards those of the future.

2. In Alberta Education's *Standards for Special Education*, a referral is "arranging for students to receive specialized assessment and/or intervention" and a specialized assessment is defined as "individualized measurement across a variety of domains for the purpose of developing and providing individualized programming for students" (Alberta Education, 2004, p. 5). An autism assessment can be one of the assessments referred for students.

3. “Wide-awake” is a term used by Greene (1995) to refer to “awakening imagination,” where the role of imagination “is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28).

4. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) describe retelling of a lived experience as a way for transformation to occur and to make sense of “life as lived” (p.78).

5. I am guided by the work of Cree/Métis scholar Dr. Trudy Cardinal (2020) in the structure of this paper’s methods section from their chapter “Becoming Real,” published in *The Doctoral Journey: International Educationalist Perspectives*.

6. In the course EDSE 603A&B (800) Sem A01: Holistic Approaches to Life and Living, alongside Dr. Dwayne Donald and Kehteya Bob Cardinal, the Winter Count practice is a form of literacy learning and involved the studying of the moon phases and our individual place that we choose to study during the seasons over a 13-month period. Then we came together monthly as a class to share our Winter Count observations and our symbols that we created for each moon phase.

7. In her work, Clandinin (2016) writes of the tensions that occur when stories meet, in particular, when “conflicting stories are understood as stories that collide with the dominant stories of school” (p. 67). When such a collision happens, there is a “bump” against the dominant narrative, creating opportunities to inquiry into the tensions that emerge from the bump as shown by Dr. Janice Huber: “This bump with their Chemistry 20 teacher caused her to think about who she was. And was becoming, in her stories of school” (p. 87).

8. In narrative inquiry, “storied lives” describes how humans live in this world, alongside others, how they interpret their experiences. As stated by Connelly and Clandinin (2006), “Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories” (p. 447).

9. Ableism is referred to as a “societal worldview that able-bodied individuals are the norm and individuals with disabilities must strive to become normal. Disability is seen as a failing rather than a simple consequence of human diversity” (Hayward & Doris, 2019).

10. Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) are support plans for students with disabilities who have been assigned special education coding according to their diagnosis (Alberta Education, 2022).

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