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Narrative inquiry into (re)imagining alternative schools: A case study of Kevin Gonzales.

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Abstract

Although there are many alternative schools that strive for the successful education for their students, negative images of alternative schools persist. While some alternative schools are viewed as “idealistic havens,” many are viewed as “dumping grounds,” or “juvenile detention centers.” Employing narrative inquiry, this article interrogates how a student, Kevin Gonzales, experiences his alternative education and raises questions about the role of alternative schools. Kevin Gonzales’s story is presented in a literary form of biographical journal to provide a “metaphoric loft” that helps us imagine other students like Kevin. This, in turn, provokes us to examine our current educational practice, and to (re)imagine ways in which alternative education can provide the best possible educational experiences for disenfranchised students who are increasingly underserved by the public education system.

Introduction: Images of Alternative Education

One of the school experiences that are available for students who are not successful in the traditional, formal school setting is the alternative school. Alternative schools in public education emerged in the late 1960s as the challenge to traditionalism in education (Robinson, 1973) and in response to particular local needs within the community (Smith, 1973). There are a variety of different types of alternative schools such as Open Schools, Schools Without Walls, Magnet Schools, Dropout Centers, Schools-Within-a-School, Free Schools, and more. These public alternative schools are currently burgeoning in number as more and more students are not experiencing success in traditional schools. In the U.S. school context, the definitions or characteristics of alternative schools vary so much that it is almost impossible to generalize accurately about alternative schools (Robinson, 1973). However, there seem to be three different images of public alternative schools that are salient today. One is “ideal haven,” another “warehouse,” and the third “school/prison continuum.”

The first image, “ideal haven,” comes from the free school movement in the late 1960s. More precisely, in the decade between 1965 and 1975, free schools opened to emphasize the educational process (Rosenfeld, 1978). Influenced by civil rights and free speech movements and the political and social tumult of the times including the Vietnam War, many of the American public became critical of arbitrary discipline and authoritarian power of traditional public schools and hailed the idea of free schools that advocated change in the fundamental structure of schools and in the purposes of education. Radical educators such as Neill in England, later followed by Kozol, Holt, Goodman, Kohl and others in America, initiated the free school movement as a “grassroots educational rebellion” (Miller, 2002, p. 114) against technocracy, authority, and social injustices, in hopes to become change agents and transform the public schools (Rosenfeld, 1978). By the mid-1970s, however, due to the decline of the counterculture, free school ideology gave rise to “open” education, “schools of choice,” or public alternative schools that are less suggestive of countercultural, oppositional, and radical politics, implementing more modestly progressive, humanistic reforms in public schools (Miller, 2002). Thus, “open” education began appealing to Americans as it emphasized the development of self-concept, problem solving, and humanistic

approaches rather than seeking a radical pedagogy, replacing the term “free schools” with “alternative schools” (Conley, 2002; Goodman, 1999; Miller, 2002; Raywid, 1995; Young, 1990).

Alternative schools in the mid 1970s were built to offer places where students would have greater freedom and opportunities for success than in traditional schools. They subscribed to the ideas of progressive education and were founded based on the premises that one unified curriculum is not sufficient for all; there is no one best way for all people to learn; and different students learn in different ways, thus they need various kinds of learning environments (Barr, 1973; Conley, 2002). Hence, the idea of individualized instruction was put into practice in order to meet students’ different learning styles, needs, and interests (Norris, 2004). These alternative schools that proliferated in the mid 1970s were viewed as “idealistic havens” for students who were not successful in conventional public schools (Mcgee, 2001). Such schools became the impetus for many reforms in the traditional schools as they experienced little or no vandalism, less absenteeism, and fewer dropouts than traditional schools (Deal & Nolan, 1978). However, most alternative schools in this era were short-lived for various reasons, e.g., internal financial mismanagement, lack of a systematic guiding philosophy, public pressure for school accountability, and the “back to basics” movement that followed in the 1980s (Deal & Nolan, 1978; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Miller 2002). Today, the legacy of these early alternative schools still continues, albeit not as mainstream, supported by such organizations as the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) and National Alternative Education Association (NAEA).

The second image of alternative schools is that of a “dumping ground” or a “warehouse.” The public tends to view alternative schools as places for students whose behaviors are disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional. Rather than being recognized as creative outlets for students whose needs are not being met by traditional schools, alternative schools are believed to exist to keep all the “trouble makers” in one place in order to protect the students who remain in traditional schools (Mcgee, 2001; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1994), which makes us question, “an alternative for whom?” (Author et al, 2008, p. 219). According to the first national study about public alternative schools and programs conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), there were 10,900 public

alternative schools and programs serving approximately 612,900 “at-risk” students in the nation during the 2000-2001 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). NCES reported that alternative schools are located mostly in urban districts, districts with high minority students, and districts with high poverty concentrations. Therefore, students in alternative schools disproportionately are those who are poor, ethnic minorities, who have limited English proficiency, or who are from lower-, or working-class family backgrounds, rendering alternative schools subject to social, political and educational inequalities. Consequently, such alternative schools are criticized as “warehouses for academically underprepared sons and daughters of working-class families or single parents receiving welfare” (Kelly, 1993, p. 12) or “dumping grounds for students (and teachers) waiting to leave school entirely” (Brown & Beckett, 2007, p. 499).

More theoretically, this image of a “dumping ground” or a “warehouse” is derived from what Clark (1968) calls, “cooling-out”. According to Clark (1968), *cooling-out* refers to socialization messages that encourage students to lower their expectations and recognize the alternative option that is provided for them as “normal,” “unchangeable,” and “acceptable.” This “cooling-out” function often takes place when the administration moves unpromising students toward more realistic—typically less significant—alternatives rather than having them fail. The purpose of cooling-out is specious in that on the surface it seems to give students who are failing at regular schools “another chance” to be educated. In doing so, the school system appears to treat them fairly. On a deeper level, however, “cooling-out” means warehousing the disenfranchised students, reproducing the existing status quo (see Author, 2005). Principals of regular schools send unpromising students to a more realistic educational structure, namely, alternative schools that they believe fit these “failing” students’ academic abilities and possibilities. Many studies reveal that these students are “warehoused” together in one place, while receiving treatment as second class citizens rather than a meaningful and equitable education (see Dance, 2002; Dryfoos, 1997; Kelly, 1993; Author, 2006; Mcgee, 2001). In this warehousing and cooling-out environment, “blaming the victim” ideology is pervasive while the school’s systematic problems remain unquestioned. A study conducted by Kleiner, Porch, & Farris (2003), for example, identifies the percent of districts nationwide with alternative schools

that reported the reasons for transferring students to alternative schools. They are: possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs (52 percent); physical attacks or fights (52 percent); chronic truancy (51 percent); possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm (50 percent); continual academic failure (50 percent); disruptive verbal behavior (45 percent); possession or use of a firearm (44 percent); teen pregnancy/parenthood (28 percent); and mental health (22 percent).

Finally, the third image of alternative schools is that of a juvenile detention center. Recent research about alternative education indicates that some alternative schools work as an interface between the school and the prison, a so-called “juvenile detention center” (Author, 2005; Nolan & Anyon, 2004). Nolan and Anyon (2004) call it the “school/prison continuum” (p. 134), where the use of academic policies such as high-stakes testing and disciplinary policies such as “zero tolerance,” are utilized more than ever. More specifically, U.S. public schools, and alternative schools in particular, increasingly resemble prisons as they invest in school security apparatus such as metal detectors, police presence, surveillance cameras, chainlink fences, surprise searches, and more (Saltman, 2003). Further, *lockdown* is becoming the pervasive language for “at-risk” youth in public alternative schools in which students are increasingly subjected to physical and psychological surveillance, confinement, and regimentation (Brown, 2003). In this sense, the main function of some alternative schools seems to keep the expelled students off the streets in order to prevent them from committing a crime (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Research points out that for more than a decade, the number of alternative schools has grown as a result of the growing number of delinquent youths and young offenders (e.g., preteens and early adolescents), not as a result of the growing public interests in offering effective education for students who were failing at regular schools (see Dryfoos, 1996; Dunbar, 2001; Howell, 1995; Author, 2005; Leone, Rutherford, & Nelson, 1991). In fact, approximately one-third of those students who dropped out of school entered the criminal justice system, causing concern about the high financial costs of the incarceration of juveniles (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). This concern has resulted in the burgeoning growth of alternative education programs and services directing juvenile delinquents to alternative schools or programs before they end up in prison (Dryfoos, 1996; Howell, 1995).

In spite of the positive image of alternative schools as an ideal haven, negative images persist sending a “not-so-hidden” message to students in alternative schools. Students quickly learn that alternative schools are for “bad” students (Author et al., 2008). They do not want to list alternative schools on their job applications because they know that if they do, they are less likely to be employed (Mcgee, 2001). There is a tendency that the public does not want to have an alternative school in their neighborhood (Author et al, 2008; Lucas, 2002). Although many educators make constant efforts to make their alternative schools successful, the purposes of some alternative schools are questionable perpetuating social, political, economic, and educational inequalities (Kelly, 1993; Author et al, 2008), which calls for more research in this field. As Brown & Beckett (2007) posit, research on alternative schools has the potential to transform our understanding of students who are on the brink of educational failure and, therefore, to contribute to helping us provide equal and equitable education for disenfranchised students.

This qualitative case study examines Borderlands Alternative High School (pseudonym), whose image falls between the dumping ground and the school/prison continuum. The purpose of this paper is to (re)imagine the role of alternative education through Kevin Gonzales’s (pseudonym) story and to question what could be the best possible educational experiences that public alternative education could provide for many disenfranchised students like Kevin. In the following, research site, research methods, and research methodology are described, followed by the introduction of Kevin and his biographical journal. Then, some possible ways of (re)imagining alternative schools are discussed.

Research Site

Kevin’s school, Borderlands, is located in an urban area where a new housing development has just started. There is not much to see in this area except “Lot Sale” signs. Borderlands constitutes six portable buildings, which can be mistaken for warehouses without the school sign at the entrance because there is no landscaping surrounding the school. The school opened in 1999 to serve students who were not doing well in traditional schools. There were 350 students enrolled from 9th to 12th grades in the 2001-2002 school year. Most students had an experience of “getting kicked” out of school more than once

before they ended up at Borderlands as a last resort. For example, Figure 1¹ below shows how frequently one student was expelled from his previous schools before he arrived at Borderlands. This drawing done by one of Kevin's classmates shows that his expulsion started at the age of 13 in junior high. He was expelled three times before being referred to Borderlands.

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

According to the school report, Borderlands received a total of 281 students as disciplinary referrals during the 2001-2002 school year. A more specific list for disciplinary referrals included: 19 for misbehavior on a school bus; 35 for defiance; 29 for disorderly conduct; 17 for possession of drugs including marijuana and an additional 50 for tobacco smoking; 12 for harassment; 41 for speech offenses; and 51 for unexcused absences. The remainder included violating dress codes and more serious incidents of assault, gang activity, theft, trespassing, and vandalism. It should be noted that the majority of these referrals were for what are termed as "status offenses," that is, they are only offenses because of the juvenile status of the offender.

At Borderlands, the percentage of students from minority backgrounds doubled over the past three years from 13% of the student population to 27%. A majority of the minority students is Latino. Most of the students at Borderlands come from low-income families and are living with a single parent. The school security guard said, "These kids have a lot of baggage," meaning that the students have a variety of personal difficulties to deal with. Students are enrolled for a half-day at Borderlands; during the other half of the day they are required by the school district to take either career explorations, service learning, or other courses at a local institute of technology, where classes emphasize working class occupations such as auto mechanics, cosmetology, photography or other vocational classes. There are also some students who receive high school credit hours for working at McDonald's or other local stores.

Research Methods

Fieldwork was conducted at Borderlands from August through December 2003. Data were

¹ This artifact was part of the class assignments of Mrs. Emm's economics class in which students were asked to describe their life before Borderlands through drawing.

collected Monday through Thursday, about five hours each day, by means of observation and participant observation. While a senior student, Kevin Gonzales, was the focus of my observation, I took part in Kevin's classroom activities; interacted with his peer students and faculty; helped the students with schoolwork; and invited them to discuss their experiences while having lunch. Cusick (1973) stated:

A participant observer begins by locating himself by and making himself acceptable to those he wishes to study. While it may not be absolutely necessary for him to adopt their dress and customs, he has to begin by respecting their behavior and accepting them as reasonable human beings. (p. 4)

Being a participant observer helped me be accepted by the school and students and to establish mutual trust, friendship, and respect. Also, being a participant observer allowed me to have a "conversation as research" (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) in which informal meetings and conversations about school experiences and daily life with students and school staff took place during break time, lunch hours, and in class. These conversations were collected as data. This approach helped me to build informal relationships with each of them. Informal talks with the principal, security guard, and school nurse provided valuable information about administrative views in this alternative schooling setting and students. Through this approach, a level of familiarity and comfort was developed among members of the school and encouraged them to talk freely. Detailed summaries of the conversations were recorded in field notes at the end of each day. Personal interviews with Kevin Gonzales were conducted three times and each interview took between 40 minutes to an hour. These interviews were not structured; most of the time, it was Kevin's free talking about his personal and school life. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by me. Other supplementary data include official school documents such as brochures, pamphlets, class handouts, and school policy documents, and students' products, such as portfolios, drawings, and poetry.

Narrative Inquiry

The research methodology employed in the study is narrative inquiry. The current political

context, especially with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, calls for the use of *scientifically based research*, a phrase used 111 times within the text (Barone, 2007), as a prescription to improve the American public educational system. In this “deepening chill in the political climate” (Barone, 2007, p. 456) against qualitative research, and narrative research in particular, we, narrative inquirers, need to seriously think about the reasons why we do what we do (see Author, 2008).

What should be noted, however, despite this political oppression against narrative research, is that there are more and more researchers, including practitioners, who employ narrative not only as a research methodology but also as a pedagogical tool in teaching and learning. Interest in narrative has grown steadily in the last decade or two, particularly in the power of story form to shape our conceptions of reality and legitimacy (Bruner, 2002). Narrative inquiry, which includes stories, narratives, or personal practical knowledge, has been popular among educational researchers and become an influential research methodology within teacher education (Goodson, 1995). There has been a series of narrative turns² and the current narrative turn in educational research challenges the positivistic paradigm that views the nature of knowledge as objective and definite (Munro, 1998). It is an effort to problematize the nature of knowledge as objective and to question unitary ways of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1988). In using narrative, educational researchers challenge the nature of the dominant knowledge paradigms through which we have shaped our understandings of education and try to reshape our views on education through the lived experiences of teachers or students (Casey, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Goodson, 1992; Munro, 1998; Sparkes, 1994). Narrative inquiry is now cross-disciplinary and its applications extend beyond lived experience and worlds beyond the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fludernik, 2005; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). It is used not only as an epistemology but also as a research methodology (see Clandinin, 2007). Further, it is also used as a medium for professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers (Conle, 2000; Author et al., forthcoming); for exploring multicultural issues in education (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005); and especially for examining race issues (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Milner, 2007). Through the burgeoning of

² See Pinnegar & Daynes (2007) for a historical review of a series of narrative turns.

publications in recent years including the *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin, 2007), special issues on narrative inquiry (e.g., *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2007, Vol. 13(7), and the *Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 103(2), forthcoming), narrative inquiry is truly enjoying a “renaissance” across the social sciences, including the field of education (Josselson, 2003).

Narrative inquiry in education presents teachers’ and students’ stories in different literary forms: autobiography, biography, poetry, literary non-fiction, or drama, to name a few³. This process is called *narrative analysis* or *narrative construction* (Barone, 2001, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative construction produces a life story in a literary format as an integral part of the research, making a range of disconnected “raw data” coherent in a way that it appeals to the reader’s understanding and imagination (Polkinghorne, 1995). In doing so, it aims at producing a literary work that has two poles: *the artistic* and *the esthetic*. According to Iser (1974), *the artistic* refers to the text created by the researcher, and *the esthetic* refers to the realization achieved by the reader. That is, the research text only takes on life when the nuances of meaning and the complexity of the research text are realized by the reader. Narrative inquiry, therefore, encourages the reader to be involved in meaning making while experiencing vicariously the lived experience of participants through their stories.

The story of Kevin Gonzales in this study is constructed as a biographical journal using the process of *narrative analysis*. Biographical narratives, according to Weiland (2003), have the feel of the familiar to most readers, and prompt among readers challenging questions regarding their taken-for-granted ideas. Biographical journal, then, means that the protagonist’s lived experiences and perspectives are portrayed and (re)constructed by a researcher in the form of journal as an outcome of the research. Based on the data collected via interviews, informal conversations, and observations, Kevin’s story is presented in biographical journal, making disconnected data coherent in a way that it makes sense to the reader, which results in a literary text that has two poles: *the artistic* and *the esthetic*. In portraying Kevin’s school experiences, the contextualized and vernacular language that he used is maintained to honor his feelings, perceptions, interpretations, and meanings he holds toward his school and life

³ See also Mello (2007) and Rosiek & Atkinson (2007) for more narrative genres.

experiences. In so doing, it purports to encourage the reader to realize the meaning and the complexity of Kevin's life as an understandable human response to the world he lives in, and provokes the reader to (re)imagine the best education for many other students like Kevin who are increasingly underserved by the public school system.

Our Protagonist, Kevin Gonzales

Kevin Gonzales is a 17-year-old, half-Hispanic and half-Caucasian student. He is from a working class family. His mother changed jobs several times, and she currently works as a gate-keeper for a housing company. Kevin's real father was a drug addict and Kevin does not know where he lives now. Kevin lives with his mother, his older brother, his fourth step-father, and two of his step-father's children. Kevin is thin and about five feet ten inches tall. He has dark-brown eyes and a quiet, soft voice. His hair (dyed black) is usually unkempt as if he does not care how he looks. He likes to wear an old-looking, green polo shirt and worn-out blue jeans that barely hang on his hips. When he bends forward to write something in his notebook on the desk, his shirt pulls up, and one can see his blue-striped underwear unintentionally. The way he dresses is the common style of other students at Borderlands, which indicates that Kevin is a typical teenager.

I met Kevin in Mrs. Emm's economics class. He would have been a senior in a regular high school if he had kept up with the school credits. Due to the lack of credits, he was placed in the junior-level class. Because he was dealing with some personal issues, he was in and out of school during his freshman and sophomore years (see Figure 2).⁴ He was one of many other students at Borderlands struggling with personal, family issues, and school life. Especially for Kevin, his mother's frequent divorces and remarriages seem to have affected him the most as reflected in Figure 2 and his interview data. It is interesting to note how Kevin juxtaposed his life before Borderlands between his mother's divorces/remarriages and his different school experience depicted in Figure 2. This implies how his personal/family life and school life are ineluctably intertwined and influence each other. He also went to jail a couple of times for doing drugs, and because of that, is now on probation. In addition, he was in a

⁴ This artifact, along with Figure 1, was collected in Mrs. Emm's economics class.

rehabilitation center for eight weeks for being depressed and suicidal. Finally, the principal of his former school referred him to this alternative school two years ago.

[Insert Figure 2 here.]

Kevin drew my attention when he told Mrs. Emm in economics class what he wanted to be in the future. His career goals were totally different from others in that class. I started talking to him in a casual manner and became friends with him over five months of participant observation while I worked as a teacher's aide and tutor. During the conversations we had between classes and three informal interviews, Kevin showed his mature and articulate nature. He was philosophical, critical, and reflective. He liked to talk about the "invisible soul and mind" (his expression), which I found thought-provoking. He was also nihilistic, sarcastic, pessimistic, and sadistic about his life. He used drugs as "crutches" to aid him to avoid thinking about his life burdens. However, it was through his writings, drawings, poetry, lyrics, and music—singing and playing the guitar—that he could maintain a critical view of his life, education, and society in general.

Kevin's Biographical Journal⁵

August 25, 2003

"OK, guys, think about jobs you are interested in. For example, you may be interested in being an auto mechanic, a chef, a car sales person, or military personnel. In my case, if I were not teaching, I would want to be an insurance agent, a travel agent, a day care owner, a coffee house owner, or an author. Actually, I'm really interested in becoming a sole proprietor after my retirement. On a piece of paper, write five jobs you would like to have after you graduate from high school. I'll give you fifteen minutes."

Today, Mrs. Emm, who teaches senior economics and English, asked us what we wanted to do after graduation. There were five of us in the classroom. James wanted to be a chef. Rick wanted to join the army. Brittany wanted to be a real estate agent. Steven wanted to open a bar. Nobody mentioned going to college. Kids like us aren't expected to go to college. We don't even have a school counselor

⁵ In Kevin's biographical journal constructed by the researcher, the pronoun, "I" referring to Kevin, is used to provoke a virtual reality (Barone, 2001).

who can help us with academic questions like how to apply for a college or a scholarship. But I want to go to college. And I want to be:

*Artist
Author-writing for a newspaper
Poet
Song writer
Musician—guitarist*

September 5, 2003

I didn't want to be at school today. Well, I feel that way every day anyway. But today, I was very upset because Mr. Schindler sent me to the office again for no reason. Even though the whole class was talking, he gotta send me to the office whenever I opened my mouth. He totally singled me out. It's because what I say is not what he likes to hear. It's because I stand up for myself. I talk back.

I was put in the office until my mom came to pick me up. My mom gave me shit for that. I couldn't stand it. So, I got into an argument with her again. As soon as my mom brought me home, I locked myself in my little room and wrote this poem.⁶

*Grasping your attention
One flaw at a time
Your words are ahead of your mind
Secure?
A shady blur
Marks the cure
Bland and blind
Can't hide
Tried
We'll all be found
Before it's too late
And yesterday
I didn't have to think
As I faded away
I'm the same
But never been sane
Any more
It's sleeping in
To every pour
I'm hanging from fear
Can you admit that you're scared* [Kevin Gonzales, 2003]

⁶ This poem and the other poem on p. 18 are written by Kevin Gonzales, who gave me permission to use them. These poems show Kevin's poetic talent and his high order of thinking.

Yes, I'm depressed. I just want to hide. In fact, I wanna hide all the time. There are too many negative things going on in the world and nobody cares. It's so frustrating and depressing. And this poem is a result of that depression. Writing a poem helps me cope with the depression. If I have a little dream, I want to make a "dent" in the world. I want to leave a little mark in the world by writing good poetry or making good music. My school doesn't teach me how to become a poet or a musician. No teacher is interested in the world of my poetry or music. To them, I'm just a trouble maker. I don't want to play this school game any more. Teachers say we have to be there whether we like it or not if we want to get a diploma. But, to me, school doesn't mean much. There is so much going on in the world, and so many other things we need to learn about. But all we do, like in Mr. Schindler's social studies class, is to copy a bunch of god damn definitions of terms from the textbook and take a test that has 150 questions on it. One hundred fifty questions! We're like, whatever. We don't even read the questions. We just choose answers in alphabetical order: A, B, C, D, A, B, C, D.... If we fail, we're given a week to study, and retake it. Whatever.

Sep. 13, 2003

Today, I got a tattoo on my right arm at the mall. Right below my shoulder. Anyone can see it when I wear a sleeveless shirt. It is one red word, "Revolution." I got it to honor my hero, Jim Morrison, who was drawn to the idea of revolting against authority. He's my idol. He was a singer-song-writer, poet, and guitarist. He was a free soul, who criticized the society for destroying people's souls with money, authority, and momentary pleasure. His poems are about feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, despair, and loneliness that are caused by the problems of society. That's why I like him and his poetry. I see the world through Morrison's eyes. It was neither my teachers nor my parents who taught me how to see the world. Morrison taught me that the world shouldn't be looked at as a perfect place to live in. He taught me to stand up for myself to be able to survive in this world. He taught me to disregard authority. Maybe that's why I cannot stand Mr. Schindler. I call him "lost soul." Whenever I say something that challenges what he says, he goes, "Be quiet!", "Shut up!" He is a BIG controlling dude. He has to make an issue about everything we do. He doesn't understand students at all. He just thinks we are bunch of

losers.

In fact, many teachers are lost souls. Ahhhh...teachers are so annoying. They are only interested in keeping their job, so they just regurgitate the stuff they are supposed to teach and show no compassion. A lot of things they teach are biased and pointless. Just straight facts that have nothing to do with life. Teachers expect us to believe whatever they say and they never let us go against it. I think it's propaganda that brainwashes and pollutes students' minds. But not mine. Jim Morrison taught me not to believe everything that adults say. That's why I get into so many arguments with teachers because I give them a piece of my mind. That's why I have gotten suspended so many times, but I don't care.

Sep. 21, 2003

We had our own family drama today. Yelling, shouting, cursing... It's part of our home life. I stopped understanding my mom a while ago when she announced her third marriage. Now she's with her fourth husband. I don't trust her any more. I don't feel connected with her any more. Living in this mess— living with my mom's fourth husband and his two children—is just hopeless. Everything looks so meaningless: home, girls, friends, school, and life... Nobody knows me. Nobody cares about me. Nobody understands me. I am so lonely and depressed.

I'm doing it again. I'm cutting myself again. My arms, my belly, and my legs...with a razor...I'm bleeding, bleeding a lot. It's painful, but... bleeding makes me feel good. I'm numb to pain. If I disappear now, would anybody care?

Oct. 1. 2003

Today, our school security guard did a backpack search on me and two of my friends. That's the third backpack search I've got this fall. That bastard must be having fun doing that. He likes to stop us and tell us to open our backpacks. He acts like a second "authority" after the principal. He always tells us, "Follow the rules, follow the rules. That's the rule number one here." He's obsessed with rules!

I've been attending Borderlands for two years. The school atmosphere has changed a lot since our former principal left last year. When he left, most of the teachers except for two left our school too. The new principal came in January this year. She brought nine new teachers from her old school. The security

guard came afterwards. Since those changes, rules and regulations became stricter than before. The security guard brags about his previous career of having been a police officer for over 20 years. We have a teacher, Ms. Dee, who used to teach prisoners how to read for five years. Our only counselor at school that deals with students with behavioral, emotional problems, is actually working for the police department, not for the school district. We see police officers on campus frequently. Every student is suspected as a possible “soon-to-be-criminal.” They say they have zero tolerance for students who are violating school rules. No grace period. In the beginning, we had 15 students in my class, but now there are only five of us. The rest were kicked out of school. I myself was suspended twice last year. Where is my school going?

October 17, 2003

I brought my portfolio home from school. We were told to take it home because our school is not doing portfolio assessment any more. Somebody in my English class asked why. Mrs. Emm said it's because it interferes with working on AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards) that everybody has to take to be able to graduate from high school with a diploma. I doubt that anybody in this alternative school will pass it because most of us are way behind our grade level. We come to school only for two hours and half each day Monday thru Friday. After school, we are bused to a vocational institute to learn skills for becoming a firefighter, auto-mechanic, cosmetologist, or hairdresser. No time for us to prepare for the AIMS test. Neither are we interested in that. But if we can't get a high school diploma because we can't pass the test, then why should we stay at school?

I'm looking at my portfolio. It has my writing assignments that I submitted last year. Some of them I'm proud of, some of them I'm not. The portfolio assessment was one of the things that our former principal started. The guideline says that its goal is to improve students' academic and personal growth. Good intention. What is personal growth anyway? We're not going anywhere in this alternative school. We can't grow. We're locked up here. Even though it is called “school,” it's an educational dumping place, if not a correction center or jail. All the problem kids who are unruly, truant, and delinquent are dumped here. Some of us like me have already been to jail. Why do they keep us here? The reason is

simple. They try to “recycle” us by mending our behaviors and mentality. Their goal is to make us recyclable so that we can work to fill the bottom rung of the society.

Oct. 26, Sun, 2003

Desolate

*Hollow smiles and plastic fingers
Fill the moment with irrelevant clichés
The context drowns in absurdity
Our insecure ideals have driven us
To the edge of a desolate cliff*

*Here we wander forever
In a vacant state
Of impressionable boundaries
While proof of this curse
Scratches the surface if you notice it*

*Confronting these objectives
Sick with impressive behavior
Begins the struggle
And is obviously our only means
For escaping their prison*

*If the thorns on the rose were truly irreparable
Our self contentment would suffer
A cold simplistic oblivion
Deaf with our being compelled
To simply compromise*

*The context freezes in obscurity
The point is overwhelmingly dulled
As the window is pushed shut
Because they know that if you
Scratch the surface they'll notice it.* [Kevin Gonzales, 2003]

This poem I wrote today perfectly describes the feeling of emptiness that I often feel. I love the word, “desolate” because it describes my mind. I feel empty as nobody listens to me. School, teachers, friends, and family are meaningless. Whenever I feel empty, depressed, and desolate, I write poems. I play music. I draw something. But if I still feel desolate, I do drugs. I started doing drugs out of curiosity when I was 15 years old. It made me feel good. It made me forget about everything. Everything bad. Everything painful. Everything messy.

To me, doing drugs is totally worth it. The feeling I get from it is really unbelievable. It helps me escape from the reality that I don't care so much about. It helps me open my mind and expand my imagination. While I'm stoned for about 6 hours, nothing matters. No matter what worries I have, I feel that everything is going to be all right. I just feel wonderful, thinking positive thoughts and a huge appreciation of the world. This is the only moment when life doesn't look so bad. Over the year, I have developed a habit of doing drugs like everybody else I know at school. I have tried almost every drug I can find: heroin, crack, mushrooms, E, cocaine, Special K, and LSD. I usually take 7 to 9 pills a week, sometimes 13 or 14 pills if I have money to afford them. "E" became my favorite in spite of its widely known, dangerous side effects. I didn't try it at first, but my friends kept insisting that it's OK as long as I don't get dehydrated from too much dancing or something. And they were right. Friday or Saturday nights are a big time for us to get together and do drugs. Drugs just go perfectly with drinking, dancing, friends, girls, and sex.

Oct. 31, Friday, 2003

Our school threw a BBQ party for us to celebrate Halloween. No classes today, which was nice. Hamburgers, sausages, chips, buns, tomatoes, pickles, mayo, ketchup, soda... There was bunch of food. The school was feeding us—about 50 students. The security guard was the chef of the day. He was in charge of grilling hamburger patties and sausages. He looked funny wearing an apron. He was even smiling, which was unusual to see. Teachers were also "behaving" today, trying to be nice to us. Ninth graders and some of the tenth graders were having fun playing volleyball, basketball, and other games like musical chairs with the teachers. More mature kids like me—mostly seniors—were just observers. We just watched kids playing, ate lunch, and left. We don't have fun at school any more. Can't wait to get out of here.

The Role of Kevin's Story

Kevin could continue writing in his journal about his school and personal life, which are ineluctably intertwined together. But he will stop here because he believes that his few days of journal entries are able to provide the reader with an opportunity of vicariously experiencing Kevin's personal

and school life and help the reader better understand how he is failing school or how the school is failing him. It should be noted that Kevin's story is not intended as an Aesop moral. Rather, it is a story beyond Aesop, a narrative that is an "invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving" (Bruner, 2002, p. 20). Therefore, it is my intention that Kevin's story would work as an open "invitation" to "problem finding," that is, it would invite readers to identify a problem(s) that might not have occurred to them before in their practices, or, more specifically, a problem(s) that might have been driving their students like Kevin to "the edge of a desolate cliff" in Kevin's poem.

Then, some may wonder: Why should we listen to Kevin's story, not others'? Why does Kevin's story matter? What does Kevin's story have to do with (re)imagining alternative schools? Certainly, Kevin does not speak for other students in his school. His particular view of school and life does not reflect the views of other students in his school, either. Then, why should we pay attention to Kevin's story that is so particular, unique, local, and temporal? Personal stories, no matter how unique and individual, are inevitably social in character (Chase, 2003). In other words, personal stories are social in the sense of reflecting the broad social, cultural, ideological, and historical conditions in which they are told and heard. Stories, then, according to Bruner (2002), provide models of the world. Therefore, to tell a story is to issue an invitation to see the world as embodied in the story. A story can stand for the world beyond the particulars to which it directly refers. It does so principally as metaphor, and it is the power of metaphor that gives the story its loft beyond the particular, its "metaphoric loft" (Bruner, 2002, p. 33). Even though Kevin's story is so particular, so local, and so temporal, it has such reach that metaphorically it allows us to see ourselves in his maladjustment to life, and to imagine other students and similar educational contexts in which they live.

Our protagonist, Kevin, as metaphor, is one of the hundreds of thousands of students who has an insecure personal life dealing with family issues, emotional, financial, personal, and behavioral issues. Kevin is one of those students who is capable of learning, but whose needs and interests have not been properly served by the public school system. Kevin is one of those students whose talents are overlooked by school because of his failing grades and resistant behavior. Kevin is one of those students who

possesses chronic pessimism, fails to trust schools and the societal systems, and has lost hope for his own future. Most of all, Kevin is one of those students who could have been thriving in an alternative school that works as an ideal haven rather than a dumping ground or a juvenile detention center.

Implications: (Re)imagining Alternative Schools

Now, it is time to release our imagination (Greene, 2000) and (re)imagine alternative schools. Kevin's complex, personal story reminds us again that not all students will succeed in the traditional school setting, which explains why we need public alternative schools that can better serve increasingly marginalized students like Kevin. Unfortunately, from Kevin's perspective, his current alternative school works as a dumping ground or sometimes as an interface between the school and the prison, like a juvenile detention center. The use of frequent backpack searches, implementation of a disciplinary policy such as zero tolerance, and the way students are referred to this school, e.g., cooling-out, indicate that Borderlands is far from being an "ideal haven." When the public school system endorses these kinds of role for alternative schools, the potentials of students like Kevin become short-circuited before they find "a place in the educational sun" (Eisner, 2001, p. 371). Typically, we blame students like Kevin for not succeeding at school, which leads to losing their trust. The more we lose the hearts and the minds of our young students like Kevin, the more overcast the future of our society will be, no matter how much effort and time we spend on raising test scores.

Conrath (2001) urges that alternative education should not be used as a dumping ground for students who are falling behind in traditional schools. Rather, alternative schools must be part of a systemic intervention that will help students recover lost hope, self-esteem, and faith in themselves, the school and the society while developing their academic skills, knowledge, and talents. Goodman (1999) argues that pedagogy of alternative education for students like Kevin must be fundamentally and philosophically different than the epistemological foundation of regular education. That is, alternative schools need to work in a holistic fashion (Miller, 2002) to incorporate the best practices of emotional well-being, and philosophy of education to build programs that address the needs of the youth they serve.

For the alternative school to work holistically, transcending being a "dumping ground," or a

“juvenile detention center,” we need to (re)imagine its inhabitants, students, teachers, and administrators and see the world of alternative education “big.” Greene (2000), citing Thomas Mann, distinguishes seeing the world small from seeing the world big:

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view,... to be concerned with trends and tendencies... To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects... and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. (p. 10)

For example, if we choose to see Kevin big, we would respect Kevin as a human being with integrity and dignity who can think for himself and stand up for himself, instead of seeing him as a mere trouble maker or a failure. As we see Kevin big, we can learn from Kevin’s story that Kevin is truly a deep, critical thinker who can penetrate the school’s ideology and critique the world in which we live. We can also learn that Kevin is one of the images that mirrors our own depression, struggles, vulnerability, loneliness, and desperation that we all experience in our school/life journey. Through this empathic understanding, we can (re)imagine him as one of us.

(Re)imagining the role of teachers in alternative schools is another way to see the world of alternative education big. Research shows that many alternative school teachers care about their students (see Author et al, 2008, for example). However, as Author et al (2008) note, a caring environment does not necessarily guarantee an equal and equitable education. Then, teachers might want to question their authoritarian, disciplining role that might take place in the name of “caring.” Teachers who earn trust from troubled students are in short supply, indeed (Dance, 2002). Teachers who do not possess an empathic bond with students, like Mr. Schindler, see themselves small, detached from their students’ unique needs. They believe their job is to have the behavior of the students under control. They are devoid of trust, empathic understanding, and a special vision for their students. They carry their job without a sense of agency, and devalue what students have to say. According to Kevin, these are “lost souls.”

Dance (2002) uses a shadow metaphor to refer to teachers who make a difference in the lives of students who are not successful in schools. These teachers cast a variety of positive shadows over impressionable young students, while working as coaches, big brothers and sisters, surrogate fathers and

mothers, disciplinarians, motivational speakers and mentors. They develop and nurture compassionate perspectives about students to foster a trustworthy relationship between the teacher and the student. Feeling valued, validated, and understood, students can “walk in the shade of positive, accessible role models” (p. 113). Building this kind of trustworthy relationship calls for relational pedagogy whose premise is that meaningful education is possible only when relations are carefully understood and developed (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Good teachers recognize the importance of relations in teaching and implement relational pedagogy. Noddings (2004) posits that:

Relational pedagogy requires teachers to acquire much broader competence in a variety of subjects. Knowing that they will meet students with widely varying interests, teachers must continue to learn and to share their learning in response to the expressed needs of students. This mutual benefit—enhanced learning for both teacher and student—is an important product of relational pedagogy (p. viii).

By working toward relational pedagogy modeling positive roles for students, teachers can avoid becoming “lost souls.”

(Re)imagining the world of alternative education “big” includes administrators including policy makers who are involved with alternative schools. I wonder whether they had an opportunity to think about how they are failing students instead of how students are failing the school. According to Waxman (1992), a school is at risk when it marginalizes minority students, provides a low quality of education, is unresponsive to students’ needs, and does not adequately prepare students for the future. When a school looks like a “warehouse” without any windows working as a dumping ground or as an interface between the school and the prison; and when a school focuses on instruction that comprises mechanical drills and copying definitions, the school fails to work as a public educational institution that benefits every student regardless of his/her racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and class background. These kinds of school environments contribute to failing students rather than helping them succeed, affecting severely students like Kevin who are already shortchanged by the public school system.

Administrators and policy makers should have a more concrete vision and philosophy for the

success of students like Kevin. Again, they should see things “big.” The vision that sees things small “looks at schooling through the lenses of a system—a vantage point of power or existing ideologies—taking a primarily technical point of view” (Greene, 2000, p. 11). On the other hand, the vision that sees things big “brings us in close contact with details and particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even the measurable” (Greene, 2000, p. 10). The new principal of Borderlands made a decision to eliminate the portfolio assessment supported by teachers who voted for the elimination at a faculty meeting. They believed that the portfolio assessment took too much time away from the instruction and they needed more time to prepare students for the state standardized test to meet the AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) in response to the district office’s pressure under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This is one example of administrators seeing things small. This administrative view seems to be concerned with “trends and tendencies” that the public system promotes for the mainstream at the expense of alternative school students’ well-being and growth. As a result, alternative education forgets to be an “alternative” that will benefit students who are not successful in mainstream schools, rather it becomes a “commodity” in the sense that it evolves from a form of human development serving personal and civic needs, into mass products in which each individual student becomes merely an object of the commodity (Eisner, 2001). In this educational milieu, disenfranchised students’ need for caring, need for meaningful, relevant education, need for respect and being valued, and need for success, remain unresolved, further exacerbating the marginalization of our students like Kevin.

As I finish writing Kevin’s story (perhaps it is our story if you will), I am thinking about his tattoo on his right arm: *Revolution*. Even though Kevin had it inspired by his hero, Jim Morrison, his tattoo reminds me of the 16th century Copernican revolution when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun. In fact, Dewey (1915/2001) uses the Copernican revolution as an analogy to explain how students should become “the sun about which the appliances of education revolve” (p. 24). In this educational revolution, students who have been “tossed” around from school to school can be “the” center around which all the appliances of alternative education are revolved. Perhaps, then, (re)imagining alternative schools requires this kind of the Copernican revolutionary thinking. Would Kevin agree with

me? I wonder.

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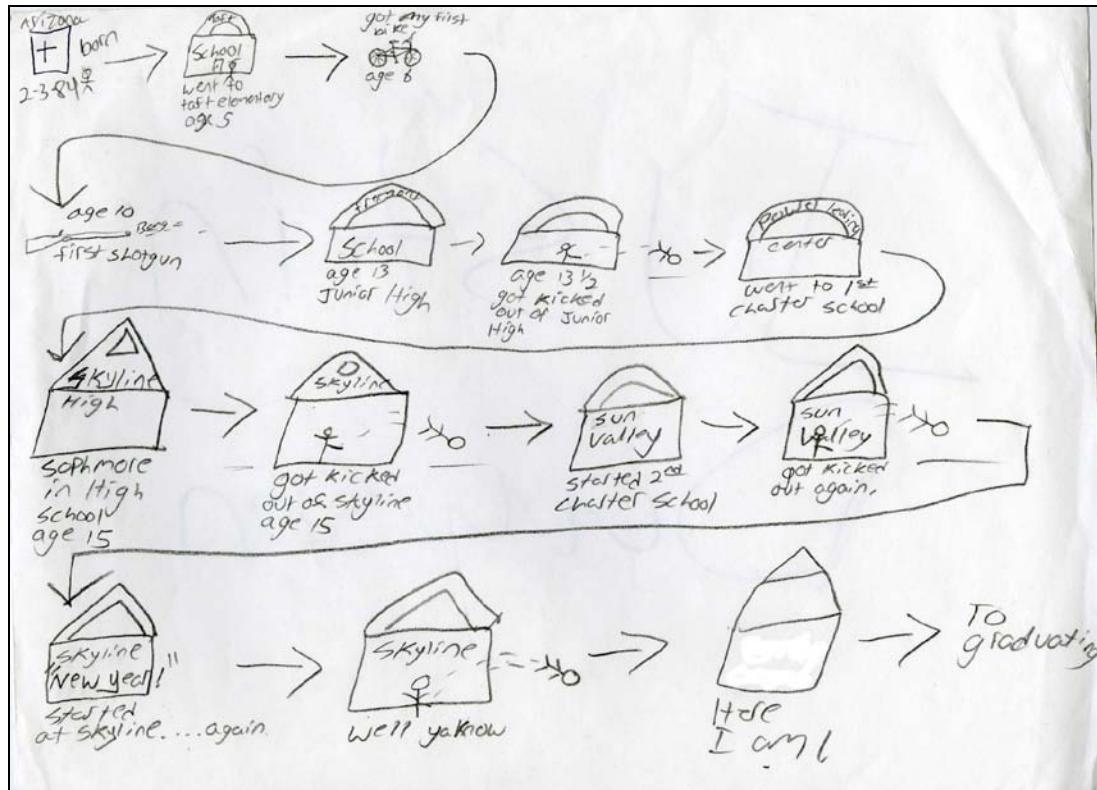
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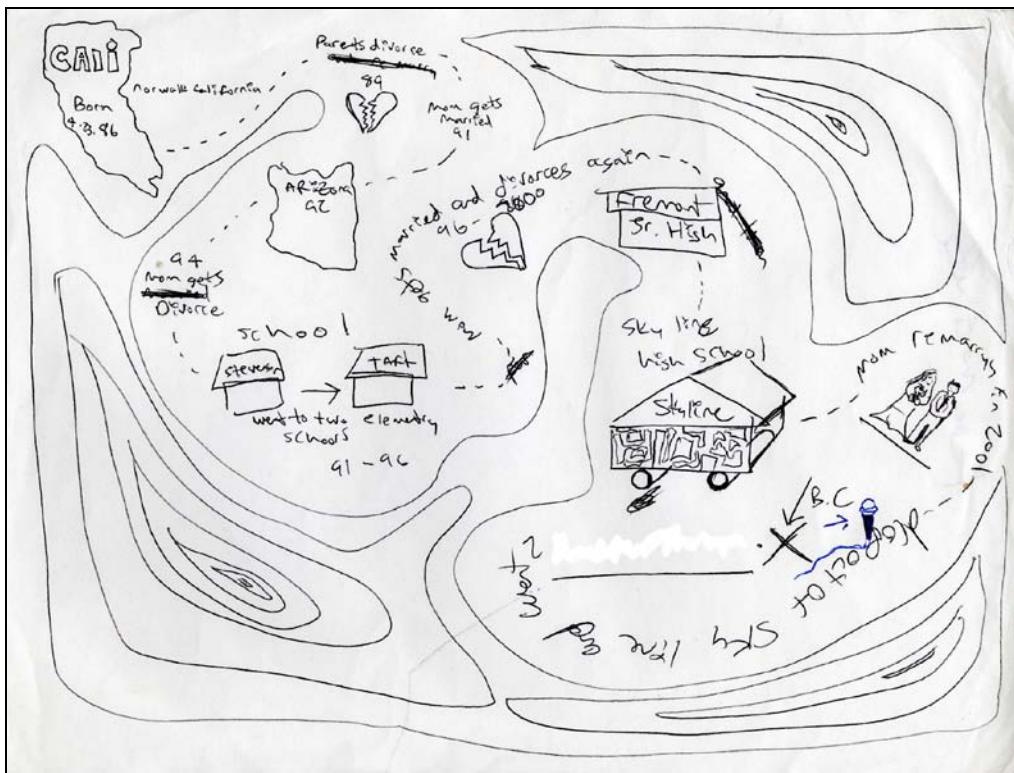
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(Figure 1: Expulsion experiences of a student: Drawing by a student at Borderlands)



(Figure 2: Kevin's life before Borderlands: Drawing by Kevin Gonzales)