I began my teaching career in a First Nations community in northern Manitoba in the early 1980s. For several years I worked as a high school social studies teacher in a small K–12 school in a Cree and Métis community. Very early into this teaching assignment, I realized that the high school did not work very well, at least in terms of the expectations I had at the time. Literacy and numeracy standards were low. There were major drug and alcohol issues in the community, and young people were introduced into the culture of substance abuse at a very early age. Teenage pregnancy was common. Attendance was sporadic, and, with the exception of a few individuals, general academic achievement was very weak. Many students dropped out of school. Those few who managed graduate mostly remained in the village living lives that were not significantly different from those who dropped out of school. A tiny fraction of my students tried their luck in post-secondary education, but they typically ended up back in the community, again living in much the same way as everyone else.

I began to see that the whole project of secondary schooling was set up to usher young people out of the community and into opportunities in the south, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority remained close to home. There were powerful precedents for this orientation. In the Platonic vision, the word education means “to lead out.” Young people are stuck in ignorance in a shadowy cave and the teacher’s job is to lead them out to apprehend reality. In the Christian tradition, the educator worked hand in hand with the cleric to steer the “savage” away from primitive and pagan ways toward civilization and true religion. In northern Manitoba, we were in the missionary business trying to save a few souls and transport them safely to a middle-class life in the south, or minimally an honest trade or working-class job.

The whole process was a moral exercise but one with crucial geographical content. The location of success was clearly not in the community itself; the space of the local was explicitly defined by teachers and school administrators as dysfunctional. The local was the cave, it was the darkness from which our students needed to be delivered. As I began to spend time outside the small circle of the teacher accommodations and started to meet people living in the community, it slowly dawned on me that while the community was significantly troubled, it was a safe, familiar home to the people who lived there. On the invitation of Ron Cook of Grand Rapids, Manitoba,
I fished on Lake Winnipeg from small boats and in the winter from Bombardiers, the ladybug-shaped snow tractors that traversed the five-foot thick frozen lake ice. I came to understand that my students and their families had deep knowledge of this place and that this knowledge was threatened by the kinds of abstract knowledge and cultural assumptions we applied quite unwittingly in the everyday practices of our professional work as teachers. My pedagogy was, as one student put it, “White-man’s stories.”

I came to know a hard-working group of people and began to take part in some of the early phases of a revival of traditional First Nations spirituality. I also began to understand that the intimate connection between Cree and Métis people and the land from which they made a living was a great deal more than a set of words mumbled in ritual fashion; it was a living relationship that had been twisted and changed irreparably by industrialization and the needs and practices of my tribe living in the south. I heard stories told by men and women my own age about the day they were playing in the woods and the bulldozers came through the trees at the head of a parade leading a road building crew followed by construction crews that built a bridge over the great South Saskatchewan river that flows through the community. The river was subsequently diverted and dammed, and some of the community’s traditional lands were flooded because of the growing need for power in the south. With the link to the south and the boomtown atmosphere during the years of construction, the community was changed forever in ways I can only begin to understand or even imagine.

I learned that despite all of these problems, most of these friends had no intention of leaving and that they were quite troubled by the idea that they ought to leave. Their ancestors had walked this land for countless generations before European contact, the advent of the fur trade, the incursions of religious and education missionaries, and later the hydro project that arrived in the mid-1960s to change people and the places they lived. As one elder told me, “Eventually you will all be gone from here, but not us.” The community was home to these people and it would continue to be home.

From the point of view of education, which was what I was supposed to be doing, I became increasingly concerned about the way the curriculum, prescribed materials, our preferred transmission pedagogies, our ways of individualizing instruction and testing, our standards, disciplinary and behavioural expectations, our cultural assumptions and generally the whole matrix of institutional practices and practitioners (most of whom were “White” southerners) seemed out of place and misguided. I started to believe that by educating, or attempting to educate, these youth for a life outside the community, we were missing the opportunity to really connect with and teach them. I remembered vague notions from my teacher training about how learning must begin from the experience of the child.
I have written some of the story of the way this experience changed me as a teacher elsewhere (Corbett, 1999), but the point is that I became less interested in the generic “what” (content) and “how” (methods) of education and more interested in the “why” and particularly the “where” of the process.

After four years in northern Manitoba, I began what was to be a fifteen-year public school teaching career in coastal communities in the Digby area of southwestern Nova Scotia. There I encountered something similar to what I experienced in Manitoba. Many of these students also seemed to stay close to home after graduation, fitting into the local economy and the family-based network that had an intergenerational history of work in resource industries, particularly the fishery. Many of these students graduated from high school, but the majority of the boys, it seemed to me, did not. My students in this new situation were somewhat more successful academically, and there was a fairly sizeable cadre that did “go on” and pursue post-secondary education, never to return to the community. These youth were considered by the teachers to have been the success stories of the school system. It seemed as though the further away a student went, the more pride teachers took in the part they played in the process. The larger group who remained was lumped into a category with the demeaning prefix “just.” The just had just stuck around here, or just gone fishing, or became just a housewife, or just took a job in town.

In the coastal community formal education was viewed by some people as an unqualified good. However, many considered it to be an expensive and time-consuming means to an end that was not achievable locally or by “people like us,” as Pierre Bourdieu (1984b, 1990) put it so cryptically in an exposition of his core concept of cultural capital. Like in northern Manitoba, there was a significant disconnect between what was going on in school and the real and imagined lives of that large group of students who had no intention of leaving the local area.

I had no real way of knowing for certain if my sense of the failure of schooling for these young people was really as profound as it seemed to be. I really did not know who left, who stayed and what role education played in these mobility trajectories. I also had, and continue to have, a limited understanding of the informal education practices and processes through which a person learns to fish or the multiple skills necessary to manage a household in a fishing family. Finally, I wanted to find out more about how people in a coastal community actually experienced schooling and the choices and life paths involved in deciding to stay or leave school and to stay or leave the community. I expected that these two latter decisions were intimately connected.

This book documents a research project that began formally in 1997.
and carried on through 2001. The general research question driving the project was simple: “In this coastal community who stays, who goes and why?” The methods I used to answer my question included two surveys of individuals who attended the local elementary school from the time it was consolidated in 1957 until 1992 (the potential high school graduating classes of 1963–1998). This survey work was accomplished with the generous help of a number of Digby Neck women and men who “tracked” virtually everyone who attended the elementary school through these years to where they currently reside. From this survey work I interviewed a sample of eighteen individuals who stayed on Digby Neck after their schooling. I then interviewed a sample of eighteen individuals who were living further than 250 km from Digby Neck. Finally, I interviewed a sample of twelve educators and former educators who taught children from Digby Neck from the early 1940s through to the late 1990s. Through 1998–2000 I conducted field work on Digby Neck that included several fishing trips.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay out some of the theoretical and conceptual issues that I think connect to the problem of learning and leaving in rural communities, and perhaps of learning and leaving more generally. In essence these chapters document my own transition from attempting to explain poor school performance and low achievement in terms of the concept of resistance developed by Paul Willis and Marxist curriculum and education theorists from the late 1970s, toward an engagement with a broader range of sources in cultural studies and in sociology. While I still find the idea of resistance useful and appropriate, I argue, especially in Chapter 2 for a reformulation of the concept that incorporates a more complex and nuanced idea of power. The title of this book is a rather obvious genuflexion to what I consider to be the importance of Willis’s classic study Learning to Labour (1977). Chapter 3 is an analysis of documentary sources that provide a demographic background for Digby Neck in historical and contemporary terms. In this chapter I also discuss the results of my own survey work that looks specifically at the contours and magnitude of the relationship between learning and leaving.

The plan of the rest of the book was developed out of the categories and concepts I developed with key informants in the field work part of the research. These informants identified three key historical periods through the thirty-six years covered by this study. The first period begins in 1963, the year in which the eldest group would have reached the age of potential high school graduation, six years after leaving the elementary school in grade 6 (1957). This first historical period ends in 1974, the beginning of limited entry licensing in the lobster fishery and the widespread regulation of the coastal fishery. I call the people who “came of age” between 1963 and 1974, Cohort 1. Chapter 4 relies heavily on their accounts of their experi-
ence of schooling and life in a community still very much dependent on the small-boat inshore fishery and a developing offshore industry.

Chapter 5 is based on the accounts of the group I call Cohort 2, who came of age between 1975 and 1986. This period was defined locally as the “boom” time that followed the widespread industrialization of the fishery. It is remembered as a period of relative and in some cases great local prosperity, large catches, modernization, abundant work and the expansion of consumer opportunities for well placed families. Chapter 6 develops the accounts of the third cohort, who came of age between 1987 and 1998, a period that began with relative prosperity that quickly transformed into what can only be described as something of a panic about the state of fish stocks after years of industrial harvesting. This time in generally understood as one of “downsizing” in many areas of the fishery.

In the final chapter I return to some of the core concepts and problems identified in the opening chapters and some of the pragmatics that follow from my analysis. This study concludes, as it begins, with a deep ambivalence. I have no direct answers to the problem of mobility as a central feature in contemporary education. I am deeply ambivalent about the way that young people in isolated and rural communities are put in a situation where a serious engagement with formal education pretty much always leads away from home. Education failure and immobility is often tragic at the individual level in contemporary Canada, but so too is education success and the depopulation of rural places. Recently, the novel problem of labour shortages in Atlantic Canada has revealed an unexpected challenge in the region. There are no easy answers at the level of curriculum and instruction, education policy or economic development strategy. Keeping young people in rural communities is not necessarily the answer. In fact, I tend to believe that educators need to be more explicit about their typically implied notion that rural youth must learn to leave. While I do believe that children in rural and coastal communities need to be taught in ways that strengthen their roots and understanding of place, I also believe that both physical travel and imaginative literate travel are particularly important in isolated schools. To promote this end, and to recognize the inspiration of the children of Digby Neck (my former students), royalties from the sale of this book will be donated to Digby Neck Consolidated School for books and for educational travel.

Notes
1. It has been suggested to me that learning to leave and learning to be mobile are essential features of contemporary schooling. I draw heavily on the work of Anthony Giddens and particularly Zygmunt Bauman who have been making this kind of argument for some years now. To be modern/postmodern is to be
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incessantly and irreversibly in motion.

2. It is also the case that as the present decade has unfolded, young people in coastal and rural communities face new challenges and opportunities as Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia have experienced economic boom periods not entirely dissimilar from those of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. These boom conditions have created new opportunities -or perhaps more importantly, the perception of opportunity, the for migrants who lack formal education.