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## Buried Treasure? Excavating Active, Meaningful, and Worthwhile Learning from an Elementary Time Capsule

Michelle Martin Gowan

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BURIED TREASURE? EXCAVATING ACTIVE, MEANINGFUL, AND WORTHWHILE  
LEARNING FROM AN ELEMENTARY TIME CAPSULE

by

MICHELLE MARTIN GOWAN

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This study explores active, meaningful, and worthwhile learning that was discovered through a time capsule that was buried by six elementary gifted students at Springdale Elementary School in Macon, Georgia in 1980. Dan, Trevette, Bryan, Lee Ann, Stephen and Rhonda are six adults who, in seventh grade, filled a trash can with time treasured relics and promised to return and unearth their treasure in 2000, but when they grew up and moved away, they lost touch with one another and their buried treasure. In 2009, Springdale's elementary gifted students located their treasure, studied its contents, compared popular culture then and now, located and celebrated the ones who were responsible for its existence.

This inquiry draws upon a wide array of research on schooling and learning such as learning about learning (e.g. Schultz, 2010, Schwab 1978), de-schooling society (e.g. Illich, 1970) and mis-educative schooling, (e.g. Ayers, 2001, Illich, 1970, Freire, 1970, Giroux, 2003, Kohn, 1999, Pinar, 2004, Rose, 2009, Taubman, 2009, Weis & Fine, 2003) how popular culture impacts learning (e.g. Brown, 1987, Daspit, 2000, Giroux, 2003, Grossberg, 1989, Kincheloe, 2008, Pinar, 2006, Reynolds, 2006, Weaver & Daspit, 2000) joy of learning, (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, Dewey, 1938, Liston, 2001, Luke, 2010, Goodlad, 1984, Rea, Millican, & Watson, 2000, Warner, 2006) how student apathy affects learning, (e.g. Coffield, 1981, Thompson, 2008, Walsh, 1981) liberative learning (e.g. Ayers, 2004, Ayers & Dohrn, 2009,

Schultz, 2008, Taubman, 2009) and the significance of place (e.g. Casemore, 2008, Pinar, 2004, Sack, 2001, Whitlock, 2007) as it relates to learning. I use Maxine Greene's (1978) concept of *Landscape of Learning* to conceptualize that learning is an aesthetic experience produced by a wide-awakeness when engaged with new ideas.

Using a combination of oral history (e.g. Borland, 1998, Davis, 1991, Janesick, 2010, Perks & Thomson, 2006, Ritchie, 2003) and personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008), I particularly ask the following questions: What kind of learning experiences can inspire learners to engage in active, meaningful, and worthwhile learning? What kind of learning experiences can inspire learners to work with teachers, parents, and the learning community in order to create inspiring learning milieus to cultivate a better human condition for all? This inquiry substantiates that engaging learning experience counters lessons that purpose to teach skills measured on standardized tests and performance standards imposed upon diverse learners.

My inquiry illuminates that lived experiences contribute to meaningful learning and purposeful living. Popular culture nurtures joy of learning that promotes liberative and active learning. Emotional connections between teachers, students, and the learning content facilitate liberative learning. Nostalgia masks privileges, inequalities, and prejudices that continue to plague public schools. Standardization quantifies aesthetic and liberative aspects of learning and imprisons the mind. My study engenders a need for cultivating a landscape of learning that promotes engagement and empowerment where learners, teachers, educators, parents, community stakeholders, administrators, and policy makers work together to inspire all learners to reach "their highest potential" (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

INDEX WORDS: Time capsule, Standardized testing, Liberative learning, Popular culture, Experiential learning, Nostalgia, Oral history, Personal~passionate~participatory inquiry.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Chase and Caroline Gowan; the two people in the world who have taught me the most and the ones who continue to challenge and educate me every day that I live.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began this journey with excitement and romanticism, armed with nearly a quarter century of successful experience in schooling, only to be jolted into a reality that schooling and learning were often confused but seldom related. It was only when I was too far in to back out that I came to really appreciate the transformation that was happening in me. Curriculum theory, while it appeared to be a very unorthodox approach to learning, ultimately bathed me in a comfort like I have never known as a teacher or a learner. It validated my ideas, challenged me to defend my position, and opened my mind to things I should have known all my life but didn't. This journey not only illuminated my professional darkness but equipped me to challenge and defend current schooling practices as a means to advocate for the students to whom I am deeply committed.

I am grateful for the experience and to the professors whom I have grown to not only respect, but genuinely admire. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Ming Fang He who is a model of commitment to her students and the kind of teacher that honors her legacy. Thank you to Dr. Sabrina Ross, Dr. Brian Schultz and Dr. John Weaver for challenging, editing, advising and guiding my research, and helping me transform it into a worthy study. You all are some of the many who hold, but the few who truly deserve the title of teacher.

I have experienced more self-indulgence during this process than I am comfortable owning. I am especially thankful to my husband, confidant, life partner, and best friend, David Gowan for the contributions that he made, the slack that he had to pick up and the many trips out of town with our children so that I could attend class or write papers in peace and quiet. I am honored that you believed in me enough to not only encourage me on this journey but to remove obstacles that I would have otherwise allowed to derail my progress. Finally, to all of the



scholars who have read, suggested, encouraged, complicated and shared with me during this process; I couldn't have done it without you. Chase and Caroline, I am proud to reach this milestone that you have been anticipating for the past five years. "*We* are finally graduating."

"Unless someone like you care a whole awful lot. Nothing is going to get better. It's not."

~Dr. Seuss (*The Lorax*)

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## PROLOGUE

The dismissal bell rang and students in my Royal Readers Book Club excitedly reported to my classroom anxiously anticipating discussing our Book of the Month selection, *Tuck Everlasting*. Natalie Babbitt employs beautiful language as she tackles the complicated subject of immortality. The characters in the story drank from a spring eighty-seven years previously that suspended their development rendering them immortal. While at first it seemed as though this fountain of youth was a tremendous discovery that everyone would desire, the Tuck family helped us understand that changing, maturing, growing old and dying are a natural part of the circle of life. Ultimately, the main character that met and befriended the Tuck family opted not to drink from the spring so that her life would not be stagnated forever. My elementary learners were anxious to talk about how they would approach the possibility of immortality and the consequences of being able to make a choice of that magnitude. Ultimately they decided that as desirable as it seemed to be to live forever, staying the same age you are at any given time robs you of so many other elements that are wonderful attributes of life.

I led my students into a discussion of how things change over time. Some things get better, like technology and gadgets that make our life simpler. Some things get worse, like prices and environmental issues. One student suggested that age comes with more responsibility and less opportunities to do whatever amuses us. We discussed how much things had changed over the last few years vs. how they had changed for both good and bad in their short lifetimes. We discussed how much has changed just within our school. Springdale Elementary is nearly thirty-seven years old and was built according to an “open classroom” design that was the latest preoccupation with school design initiatives at the time it was built. Within a couple of years, the

whole school was eventually partitioned into individual learning classrooms and has ultimately been completely renovated according to modern classroom design plans.

Finally, we discussed how people often document a particular moment in time with artifacts that represent a certain stage of development and return to the cache at a later date to discern how much change had taken place since the inception of those timely treasures. I told my students that in my twenty-five years as a teacher, I had actually participated in the burial of three time capsules with different groups of children and that I looked forward to the chosen dates where I might be able to participate in the disinterment of those treasures and see all those students again. I knew when we assembled those capsules that I would be old when we saw those items again, but I anticipate with great excitement seeing those students all grown up.

This excellent piece of children's literature provided young readers segue to engage in serious thinking and conversation about a concept that we all dream about until we consider the price of stagnation. As my book club meeting ended and I was stacking the chairs preparing to leave, one of my students stayed behind to help me. He told me that his uncle was in the elementary class of gifted learners at this same school a long time ago and that they had buried a time capsule on the school grounds intending to dig it up in the year 2000, but they never did. All of those students had grown up and moved away and now nobody could find it. I told my student that we should look for that buried treasure and see what has changed versus what has stayed the same since 1980 when it was assembled. He left promising to call his uncle to get more details about the buried treasure.

I have always been captivated by time capsules, as a teacher, as a student, and as a life-long learner. The artifacts and writings contained therein create a snapshot of an era when we wanted time to stand still. In my first year of teaching, my class buried a time capsule in honor of

Haley's comet. We collected artifacts and letters and sealed them in a copper box and secured them in an underground vault. We not only spent time documenting the way we saw the world in 1986, but we also speculated as to what future advancements we would realize in technology in the coming years. We employed problem-solving to hypothesize what environmental issues we would be facing in the future, and we used math skills to calculate how prices had changed in the previous twenty years and used the same formula to speculate what they might be in the twenty years to come.

In 1986, teachers enjoyed much more latitude in engaging students in learning opportunities that were meaningful, memorable and applicable to life. Being a new teacher, I did not recognize the value that the creative project would have for my students until years later when the time came to exhume our buried treasure. My fifth grade students wanted to disinter the capsule in the year 2000 and I agreed that we should all meet back at Hamilton Elementary School to revisit the treasure we had compiled and nestled safely beneath the ground. As the chosen time approached, students from that first class were contacting me in a variety of ways. Some called me locally, some called from military installations around the world and sadly, one called from state prison. Some contacted Hamilton School and they were told that I had transferred schools twice since we buried that capsule. Honestly, as the time approached, I did not give that project much thought. By that time, I was teaching gifted learners, I was on long term leave due to a complicated pregnancy, and I had transferred to a school in the opposite end of the county. I did inquire with the principal of Hamilton and learned that a sidewalk and flagpole had been installed over the location where we buried our capsule so I dismissed the idea of bringing up our treasure. But, the calls did not stop. I remember reminiscing with students when they contacted me, each one thinking that he or she was the only one who remembered that



we were supposed to disinter the capsule we had buried years before. That time capsule that we compiled and buried in honor of Haley's comet still rests where we ceremoniously left it in 1986, awaiting the destruction of the school building which is scheduled to close in another year.

I have since buried a time capsule at every school where I have taught, each one representing a different era, a different group of children and a different theme. Even though I have orchestrated the burial of four time capsules during my teaching career, I have yet to unearth one and fully appreciate the degree to which learning took place in that one enrichment activity. Suddenly, the time capsule concept that had captivated me throughout my teaching career offered a new challenge. I would love to find the time capsule from 1980 buried on the school grounds by the same class I now teach! I hoped that we would be able to get enough information from those who had memory of the capsule to locate it and investigate its contents.

As excitement for the hidden treasure grew with intensity, we launched a campaign to find the missing time capsule on our school grounds. I procured a metal detector, asked teachers who had been at this school for many years and even called some retired teachers to inquire about the hidden treasure. A few parents of current Springdale children had a vague memory of the time capsule and many mentioned "the fenced-in area behind the lunchroom" as a place to look, but that was still too broad. The metal detector did not prove to be useful for locating the capsule because the area we were searching was the location of all of the underground utilities for our building. The retired former teacher of the gifted believed it to be under the new construction that was built about five years ago. Judging by how many students from my first class contacted me when it was time to exhume our time capsule at Hamilton School, I knew I had to find those original students who buried this one. The only student I knew who was part of that group was forty-one years old and lived in California. I contacted him by phone and found

him to be quite accommodating. He said that he still has family in town and he was planning to come for a visit on spring break and he would come by the school and show me the exact location if we could wait that long. He described a few things that he remembered including in the time capsule, such as Michael Jackson's record album, Nike® tennis shoes, an Izod® alligator emblem, and a lot of information about the school, the state, and the economic crisis of 1980. He remembered writing about the Iranian hostages, the technologically superior Polaroid® camera that instantly develops photographs and Pac-Man® among other video games. He told me that we should be looking for a 30 gallon galvanized metal trash can painted blue with an eagle painted on one side and everyone's name on the other side. He thought that there was a story in the local newspaper about the time capsule but he did not have any idea how to locate that story. When I hung up the phone, I marveled at the detail with which he remembered this learning experience. I wondered if the activity I had initiated three times before held the same impact and meaning for my students.

I contacted the retired teacher and asked her if she could remember what all was in that time capsule and she could not. She had been battling cancer for several years and she blamed her fading memory on chemotherapy, but she said that she did hope we could find it because she would like a nostalgic view into her career as a teacher of the gifted. As excitement to find the time capsule swelled throughout the school, the retired teacher began to worry that we might be disappointed when we finally did find it. She said, "It was only a trashcan full of stuff important to a few gifted kids". I knew that if it were important to schoolchildren in 1980, it would be of interest to schoolchildren in 2009.

Being unable to find a buried treasure outside the back door of my classroom, I turned to a new way of finding information from a large group of people; *facebook*. I posted an

announcement that we were looking for a time capsule that was buried by the class of gifted learners in 1980. In true *facebook* style, that message was forwarded to an entire network of people who walked the halls of this elementary school years before. Within a few days, I received a phone call from a gentleman in South Carolina. He confidently proclaimed that he knew the exact location of the time capsule.

“How do you *know*,” I inquired skeptically, recalling the number of wild goose chases I had been on in the last few weeks.



**Figure 1. Newspaper photo from 1980**

“I am holding in my hand a picture of me digging the hole,” he proclaimed proudly.

If I thought that the teacher from California had a great memory for details, it paled in comparison to this grown-up gifted learner.

“I have been waiting 29 years to open this time capsule and revisit that time of my life,” he related. “I will not tell you where it is until I can get in the car and drive to Macon because I don’t want you to bring it up without me there.”

Wow! What in the world could be in that trash can that might compel a forty-one year old man to travel out of state to reminisce about something that he left there when he was in the seventh grade? I related to him my concern that we had covered the location with a cooling tower when the new addition to the school had been built and asked him to just give me a landmark so we could search a bit more, before he wasted a trip to Macon. The next morning, I photographed the area he described from memory and emailed the

pictures to his office. He promptly put an X on one photograph and returned it to me, telling me to probe in that exact location. Maintenance workers explored that area and immediately hit the top of the time capsule. They dug down about 2 feet and uncovered a blue trash can lid emblazoned with white letters-- TIME CAPSULE YEAR 2000. We had located the hidden treasure!

The time capsule remained in the confines of the earth for about two weeks with only the bright blue lid peeking out from under the surface. The same gentleman who told us the precise location also remembered the names of every student in that class,



**Figure 2. Capsule discovered just beneath the surface**

the teacher, and even more details than the California teacher. I was amazed. My thoughts were now consumed with another student who related how meaningful this event was in his erudition. I wondered if the other students had similar memories. Were these learners the exception or the rule? I now had a mission to find four more students.

One by one, hints came in but not necessarily contact information. One girl had lived in Macon while she was in elementary school and her father was a teacher at Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law, but he had since moved and become a Dean at another Law School. Contacts were chasing down that lead when someone else said that one of the girl's mothers was a teacher at Springdale and had retired many years ago. I felt that finding her should be pretty easy. As the search for the students gained momentum, excitement grew around the possibility that we might be able to locate all of the students who had participated in this learning

experience almost three decades ago. I contacted a local newspaper columnist regarding writing about our excavated treasure hoping to find all of the students. He agreed to come see what we had found and to write about it, but before his article was published, we had found all of the students involved in the project.

I eventually found names, phone numbers and email addresses for each of the participants. I sent out a group email to all of them letting them know that we had found what they left for us and articulating how meaningful it was in the erudition of my students. Within a day, the entire group was buzzing back and forth reacquainting themselves with each other. All of them were college-educated and enjoyed professional success. I could tell by the responses that they were anxious to see each other as much as their treasure so when I told them that my students intended to bury another capsule as they had, I invited them to join us for the event. Based on the fact that the forty-one year olds were geographically located all over the country and were very busy professionals with families, I did not expect that they would all agree to come. I figured if the one or two local adults joined our celebration it would be a success.

As the participants continued communicating and catching up with each other by way of emails and cell phones, my anticipation increased that I might have several of them show up for the event. The teacher from California and the artist from Massachusetts seemed the least likely to join us based exclusively on the distance from their elementary school. The lady from Massachusetts was first to commit. She said that she had thought about the capsule over the years but she had thought even more about the relationship she had with her classmates and she would make arrangements to attend. The gentleman from South Carolina said that he had thought about that time capsule at least every week since 1980 and he could come to Macon to see it even if nobody else did. One of the former students told us that she thought it was great

that we had found it and it had proved to be beneficial to later Springdale students but she had several important business trips upcoming and she did not think she could make it.

Of course we were glad to have any of the adult “children” respond to our invitation. When we found the teacher whose daughter had participated, she became so excited about the possibility of participating that her daughter rescheduled her upcoming business trips so that she could join us for the celebration. My student’s uncle from California told us that he had just made a trip to Macon a few weeks earlier to see his family and he didn’t know if he could justify the expense to fly home again for this event, but within a few days, the excitement of seeing everyone and their time capsule again caused these very busy, professional adults to set aside their usual schedules and make plans to return to Macon.

As each of the 1980 elementary students responded that they could attend, our plans for a celebration were amplified. We wanted to be able to demonstrate the learning that they facilitated for my current students as well as document 2009 in a similar way for future Springdale learners who might uncover our own buried treasure. We first decided that we wanted each of the former students to include something in our new capsule. Next, we determined that we wanted to plan a celebration including the whole school, retired teachers and “the children”



**Figure 3. Students watch the workers remove the capsule**

when we buried our new capsule.

At the end of class about two weeks later, the office called my classroom to alert us that the maintenance workers had returned to complete the unearthing of our buried treasure. My students eagerly exited out my back door to the fenced in area where the capsule awaited us. They hung on the fence with their

fingers laced through the chain links and their noses pressed through the holes to get a good view of the exciting excavation. As the workers carefully shoveled the dirt from around the trashcan, we could read the names of the students who compiled the capsule. It appeared to be in good condition, considering that it had been sealed in the moist earth for nearly three decades. Cheers



**Figure 4. Workers remove capsule from the ground**

rang out as the workers finally freed the bright blue painted trashcan from its resting place. Suddenly, I could tell by the expressions on the faces of the workers that something was terribly wrong.

“The whole bottom just fell out,” one of them said. We looked into the hole where the can used to be and saw a muddy pile of plastic bags.



**Figure 5. Bags contained in the capsule were wet and muddy**

“Let’s collect those bags and take them over to the grass and look at what is inside those bags,” I suggested, trying to disguise my anxiety that the entire contents might be ruined. The class responsible for burying the time capsule had painted the top and the sides but failed to paint the bottom of the

trashcan. As the can sat inside the muddy earth, the bottom rusted and eventually disintegrated completely leaving the contents exposed to ground water and mud for decades. My excitement

gave way to anxiety as I considered what might be lost here. What if our long awaited treasure, our serendipitous learning experience is actually a big pile of mud? What will I tell my students about an activity like this one? What will I tell the students who compiled this capsule? Will other teachers and administrators tell me to stop chasing a dream and go back into my classroom and focus on the standards that will be measured on the impending test?

I sent a couple of students for a bucket of water as the rest of us gently opened the plastic bags. Even though the students had carefully laminated pages and attempted to seal the contents in individual plastic trash bags, the contents were still filled with muddy water. I wished that Ziploc® bags had been widely used when this was buried so that we might have a better chance of finding these relics in better condition. We sifted through the muddy contents with archaeological precision. One by one, we carefully dipped the artifacts into the bucket of water and gently wiped away the residue that clung to each of the relics. We were pleasantly surprised to find that we could identify many of the items that we had presumed would be a total loss.

As an experienced teacher, I recognized the value of what was transpiring before me. This was a unique opportunity for my students to engage in meaningful discourse about the progression and transformation of our culture over time. At the same time, I recognized that the students on the front end of this project considered this to be a significant element in their own academic journeys. The enthusiasm I had for this serendipitous learning experience soon became clouded by the recognition that I would have to defend the instructional time spent on these relics to teachers and administrators who are so focused on data and measurement that they are blinded to the rich opportunities that are presented on a daily basis for which the students already possess an intense interest. While I did not know what was contained in the capsule, I did



know that the artifacts would have a story to tell and that my students would be afforded a unique cultural learning experience.

When I was a new teacher, I depended heavily on the curricular road map outlined in pacing guides. I needed guidance on what to teach and when to teach it so that I could ensure that the learners for whom I was responsible met the expectations by the end of the year. Even in my earliest experiences, I was afforded latitude to seize valuable opportunities for learning and engage my students at a high level as these opportunities presented themselves. By the time I had just a few years of teaching experience, I recognized the value of that engagement as well as the need for the students to have more ownership in their own learning. As I have grown professionally, I have become more and more passionate about the value of these experiences. I developed the conviction that it was a critical part of what I was supposed to do to be a good teacher. I also recognized that these learning opportunities were the very ones that required students to employ critical thinking, a skill with which they could pass *any* test. Looking back, I have struggled to teach students how to solve the dreaded word problems. I used to think that the barrier was that they weren't proficient readers. Now I know that it was not about reading or figuring out what the problem was asking them to solve. The reason students resist solving math word problems is because they fail to find meaning in the task. As soon as I asked students to figure out their own batting average, or how much pizza to order for 23 students or the total cost of the art supplies needed for a project, they could easily solve the problem. The difference was not in the reading or the math; the difference was in the meaning.

The first obstacle my students and I had to overcome in making meaning from a treasure hunt was the condition of the artifacts. If the relics dissolved from our handling of them, we would only have a partial image of 1980 that the students who compiled the capsule intended.

We handled the artifacts with archaeological precision as we identified every artifact contained within the muddy bags.



**Figure 6. Cassette tape found in the capsule**

A cassette tape was rusty and muddy but we could make out the words *Thriller by Michael Jackson* before the water washed away the ink on the tape completely.

“A cassette tape!” one student exclaimed. “I guess it is okay that it is all muddy because who even has a cassette player anyway?”

“A cassette tape was modern technology when this was buried. In 1980, some people were still listening to music on vinyl record albums and eight track tapes.” I explained. At this point I recognized how foreign a cassette tape really might be to my young learners. The most primitive thing they had ever known to contain music was a compact disc. I suddenly began to see these contents as a real bridge to the past for the learners in my class.

We opened another bag and I heard, “Yuck, it’s a sock! Why did they think we would want their dirty, muddy, sock?” another student questioned. I dipped the sock into the bucket of water and wrung it out. The sock itself was in fairly good condition considering it had been exposed to mud and water for years.

“Look! There’s an alligator on that sock!” another student proclaimed. I immediately recognized that alligator as the famous *Izod*® logo that had dominated fashion during



**Figure 7. Izod® sock**

my own teen years. I explained to my students that the alligator on that sock was similar to wearing a shirt today that had *Abercrombie*® emblazoned across the front or an oversized polo pony embroidered on the pocket. The alligator made the golf shirt a staple in everybody's wardrobe.

"Golf shirts are still very popular today." I added. "Look at our school uniform shirts. Without a logo, it is ordinary; something that everyone has, but if you add a polo pony or little flag or even a designer's name to the shirt, it becomes a fashion statement. This little alligator represented the beginning of a trend that we still enjoy today; wearing our labels on the outside of the shirt. It is a way of saying, "I have on a designer piece of clothing," I disclosed.

"*Izod*® was a monumental fashion trend at the time these students assembled this time capsule and I imagine that none of these students wanted to part with a whole shirt so they had to settle for a sock, because that was much more affordable," I added. We sifted through a couple of bags of paper items that were barely recognizable as movie ticket stubs and concert memorabilia. "Paper does not hold up well in water," I told my students. "It's a shame because I would like to be able to read this playbill and these tickets to see what entertainment these students thought was so worthy of including it in this capsule."

Another bag contained a medicine bottle like the kind we see every day at the pharmacy. I knew the bottle was not new to 1980 and the label had been removed. We wondered aloud why the bottle was included when we opened it to pour out



**Figure 8. Medicine bottle with childproof cap**

dirty water. There was a little strip of paper inside that had been laminated. It read *this is the new childproof medicine cap that will prevent little kids from being able to open a bottle of medicine that is dangerous for them*. Instantly we recognized that this it was around the time this capsule was assembled that there was much attention given to the fact that dangerous medications often fell into the hands of curious children. This artifact yielded an opportunity for me to engage my learners in some historic problem solving. I recognized that these children are growing up without having to consider the consequences of a bottle of medicine prescribed for an adult falling into the hands of a curious child. I took the opportunity to explain that when I was their age, medicine was usually kept high out of the reach of young children because the bottles were opened as easily as a bottle of bubble bath. Then, as children suffered injuries and even death from ingesting adult medications, this childproof medicine cap was the solution to that problem.

A vinyl forty-five record emerged from one of the soggy bags in exceptional condition, except for the paper label. We could tell from the chalky, muddy residue that it had been encased



**Figure 9. Forty-five record found in good condition**

in its paper sleeve originally but the water disintegrated it years ago.

“I know what that is!” exclaimed one eager student. “It is an antique CD!”.

“Well, it does look like a compact disc and it does contain music, but if we put this thing in our CD player, I don’t think you would

hear music.” I suggested. “This is a vinyl record and it is called a forty five because that is how many times it spins per minute on a record player. A record player has a little arm with a needle

on the end and the needle fits into the grooves on this record and that is how this thing plays music.” I explained to the students.

“A real needle? Can it get scratched like a CD?” inquired the student.

“Oh yes, it can get scratched very easily and when it does, it causes the needle to jump and you get the same phrase over and over; like the record has the hiccups!” I told them. “I must admit, the way we listen to music has improved tremendously since everyone played vinyl records, but back when these things were popular, we thought it was awesome!” I explained. I wondered aloud how many different ways these children might store and play music in their lifetimes with technology advancing so quickly.



**Figure 10. Nike® shoes**

Finally I picked up the bag that seemed to be the heaviest. I gently tore open the bag to reveal a couple of pairs of shoes. First, there was a pair of very muddy canvas Nike’s with the light blue swoosh.

“Oh I remember these shoes!” I told my class.

“Everyone wore these!”

“You actually *wore* those goofy looking sneakers?”

A fashion conscious student inquired indignantly.

“I certainly did!” I

snapped, unapologetically. “Everyone wore these. They were the coolest shoes around at the time and like the *Izod®* alligator, these shoes made a fashion statement as well.” My students grimaced and rolled their eyes sympathetically as if to feel sorry for my



**Figure 11. Docksider shoes**

abysmal sense of style. I recognized that this cultural cache was going to present an opportunity for me to engage my students in some serious conversation about how fashion and style is relative and how it will change by next year as time marches forward.

The final pair of shoes I retrieved from the muddy bag was found in much poorer condition. It took me a minute to recognize that these were shoes we called “docksiders.”

“Oh I had a pair of these too!” I announced. “I am surprised that leather did not hold up as well as canvas.” I mused. “Then again, I suspect that these were not genuine leather. This style of shoes was originally leather and looked like Sperry’s® now. These shoes represented a style of boat shoes worn on a yacht. They sort of ushered in the whole nautical look that is still popular today and you can see that this style of shoe is still popular, although sold under a different brand name.” I explained. The material from which these shoes were constructed was in the process of disintegrating completely. Every surface we touched felt like soft butter and the only component that was still intact was the rubber sole. We handled this artifact gently and laid them out to dry, hoping that we would ultimately be able to tell more about them when they had a chance to dry out. “These shoes were as popular as *Crocs*® are today.” I told them. My students looked as if they could not believe that nearly as many people would wear boat shoes as wear those rubber beach shoes today.

The final item in that bag was a shred of denim. It was falling apart and we could not tell if it was a pair of blue jeans or a denim shirt, but we concluded that denim was as popular then as it is today. This artifact would give us a springboard for investigating the effect that water and mud have on fabric over time. It was certainly biodegradable.

The final package contained a book full of laminated pages. These pages had been arranged in a cardboard report cover with a metal band binding. The cover had disintegrated and

the binding rusted and disappeared, leaving only rust stains where the binding had been and a few rusty shards of metal floating around in the bag. We gently separated those pages and carefully laid them out on the grass. This book contained pages of information about 1980 like current events, fashion trends, technological advancements, entertainment, natural disasters, money, Springdale School and the everyday activities of these seventh grade learners. This book was clearly the heart of the information assembled among the relics contained in that blue trash can. From these pages, my learners could glean what was important to the students, the school, the community, the country and the world through the eyes of a gifted seventh grader.

“Hey, Mrs. Gowan! Can we make a time capsule about 2009 and bury it for a class to dig up a lot of years from now?” inquired one ambitious student.

“Certainly!” I responded. “I think it would be very valuable for us to bury a time capsule just like this class did. This weekend, why don’t you all think about what we might include in our time capsule and what things might represent our year. Think about current events, this latest historic election, how we listen to music and what movies and toys are popular. Let’s look at prices of gasoline, groceries and homes. Will this building still be an elementary school when we open the capsule? What kinds of clothing are fashionable today? What jobs exist today that did not exist when this capsule was buried? What jobs might exist when this capsule is opened that don’t exist even today? What technology is making our lives easier and what might become dangerous for us? This weekend, I want you to think of what we need to include if we want to be able to make



**Figure 12. Collection of the contents of the capsule**

time stand still for a group of learners in the future who are not even born yet. How will we describe this year? Think about the things that are in this time capsule and how much we can learn from what this other class assembled for us.” I instructed my class.

“These pages are going to have to dry somewhat before we are going to be able to decipher everything recorded here. Anyway, it is almost time to leave for the day.” I told the students who were still curiously looking at these muddy relics. As my students prepared for dismissal, I brought all of the things that were drying out on the grass inside my classroom and laid them out carefully to dry. Several teachers who had only recently become curious as to what might have been included in a Springdale time capsule from 1980 dropped in to see our treasures. Some of them looked a little disappointed in the condition of the artifacts while others smiled at the nostalgia of some of those same fashion trends. I didn’t get the idea that any of the teachers thought this compilation had any real academic value because the only content that really counts is measured on the CRCT, the annual state assessment by which teachers and schools and learning are ultimately judged.

This serendipitous learning experience presented itself in the spring, just as the state testing angst was getting ramped up. During the spring especially, most teachers are focused on practicing test taking strategies at the expense of engaging learners in current events or other non-measurable learning opportunities. It is as if they are wearing blinders to everything that is happening around them because they are acutely aware that what that test



**Figure 13. Contents were readable after they dried**



measures on that one day will determine their value as a professional for an entire year. It is as if teachers cannot take a risk to step outside the standards for even a moment because every moment not spent studying a standard is considered “wasted” if it cannot contribute to what is measured on “the test.”

As I prepared to leave school for a long weekend, I thought about these treasures and what learning opportunities they presented. My students were more than just naturally curious, they wanted to analyze what we had found and compare the past to the present. As a teacher of the gifted, I am fortunate to have more flexibility with my schedule than regular classroom teachers. I do have a curriculum to follow but I am always looking for opportunities for my students to learn something that not only interests them but also is relevant to them and their learning. The framework of my curriculum is only a launching pad. I did not begin that year knowing that we were going to be unearthing a time capsule or compiling another one. What I did know is that the lived experience or “currere” (Pinar, 2004. p. 415) is one of the most valuable educational avenues through which my students would learn. It was up to me to seize these opportunities and exploit them for their academic value for my learners.

During the weekend that followed this excavation of treasure, I thought about the artifacts and the academic implications that each one held. For me, it was so much more than nostalgic. Yes, I could remember those fashions and I listened to Michael Jackson on cassette tapes, but I recognized that these muddy relics could bridge Springdale students from nearly three decades earlier to my learners who were just beginning their educations.

The soggy pages of the book held a number of Polaroid® photos that were in remarkably good condition. I noted to myself that photography and digital imaging had come a long way since this was the latest technology. Most of the pictures were taken at school of various students

and staff. The pages included a number of magazine articles and images of current events. The students had included the prices of homes, groceries and automobiles. They had recorded their class trip to Orlando, Florida and included the playbill from their class production of *Sleeping Beauty*. The seventh-grade gifted students who had assembled the time capsule were clearly passionate about the project and took seriously the task of recording the world as they saw it in 1980. There was some evidence that these students had planned to reconvene and open their buried treasure as they included the addresses and phone numbers of their parents and writings about what they thought they would likely accomplish in the next twenty years. I smiled when I found a carefully constructed diagram of the area where the time capsule was buried tucked *inside* the capsule. They painted their names on the outside of the trash can and identified YEAR 2000 as the time they intended to meet back at Springdale to revisit these treasures and each other.



**Figure 14. The recovered capsule**

When I realized that all of the students who were pictured in the newspaper had indeed made plans to join us for the celebration, I knew that I had more unique opportunities to engage my learners in meaningful questioning. In the next few weeks, my curriculum focused on these relics from 1980 and we dove headfirst into lessons that we could glean from the popular culture. My students compared prices in advertisements over three decades, researched the political climate of Iran and learned about our government's failed attempt to rescue the American hostages, compared the impact of natural disasters of Mt. St. Helens to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, explored the new interest in protecting the environment then and contrasted it

with our energy consciousness of today, created a timeline of iconic science fiction movies and television shows *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, downloaded music representing each year that passed while the time capsule held its ground onto their iPods®, researched the progression of the technology for playing and storing music via record albums, 8 tracks, cassettes, CDs, and MP3s, investigated the evolution of cell phones and cameras over the past three decades, tried to visualize a world with no Internet, and postulated how the world might change in the next thirty years while their time capsule sleeps. Sure, they amused themselves with the transformation of fashion trends, but even with the amazing lessons that were facilitated by the cultural treasures, other professionals in the building failed to validate the learning based on the fact that the information could not be aligned with the questions on the CRCT (Criterion Reference Competency Test), the Georgia state mandated proficiency test. It made me feel as if we had reduced education to unmeaning, unrelated, bits of measurable data to the degree that we would totally ignore the rich, meaningful lessons that are presented by the culture in which we are immersed.

I continued corresponding by email with each of the students responsible for facilitating these phenomenal lessons for my students. I thanked them for what they had assembled and shared with them some of the comments from my students. Each of the 1980 students remembered this activity with great fondness and expressed gratitude that we actually took enough of an interest in what they had compiled to actually look for it and them.

As we prepared to inter another time capsule, we considered what all we learned from the muddy contents that we handled. I was not sure that the 1980 students even considered anyone other than themselves unearthing their capsule, but that did not hinder the rich lessons that we were able to implement. As we set out to compile another time capsule, I wanted to be very

purposeful in what we chose that would represent 2009. We first wanted to leave details about exactly where our capsule was buried and information about what was inside in a notebook in the office vault. I assembled the notebook hoping to give whatever teacher and students might be looking for it more direction than we had. I was careful to include how valuable the cultural lessons were based on what was included in the time capsule we found and wrote a letter to whoever might be looking for our time capsule. I stopped just short of writing the lesson plans for the teacher who might find our buried treasure.

“What do you think was most valuable for our learning from the old capsule that might be included in our new capsule?” I asked my students.

“Definitely technology! I mean, look at this stuff that was supposedly the latest, greatest technology.” Added one of my technology geeks. “Who would have thought that a camera with film that develops instantly was great technology?”

“Well granted, the images we print today are far better quality, but 1980 was on the cusp of doing everything faster. Back then, we sent film out to be processed and it would take a week or so to get prints.” I explained. “Naturally, film that developed within minutes was appealing. This technology did not come cheap. These students noted that the film was quite expensive; almost fifty cents per print. We don’t pay that much for prints now. People who used that type of film and camera also paid a price in quality. These images were dark and lacked the crisp detail that we demand in our pictures today. I can’t believe that after years of exposure to water and mud, we can tell anything from these pictures.” I said.

“What about telephone technology?” I questioned. “The 1980 students indicated that phones were moving from rotary dial to push buttons but all of these phones were still connected to the wall by a cord.” I added.

“Cell phones!” shouted a student looking at the soggy pages of the book. “We need to include that just about everyone has cell phones now.”

“A cell phone is more than just a phone now.” I prompted. “What all can a cell phone do now that early cell phones could not do?”

“Texting!” shouted a student, imitating speedy messaging using his thumbs.

“GPS signals and directions to where you are going!” added another.

“Take photos and videos!” yelled out another student.

“Do you mean a phone has not always been a camera?” added another.

It was at that moment that I recognized that as valuable as these relics had been, there were indeed some gaps in the progression of technology. My students have never known life without the information superhighway, instant messaging, cordless communication, global positioning satellites, and data at our fingertips. I recognized that I needed to demonstrate some



**Figure 15. Early and late model cell phones** brought a huge cell phone that looked a lot like a radio. It weighed about three pounds and the long metal antennae stretched out beyond the confines of a leather bag. I placed that old cell phone on a table and positioned my thin, lightweight, touch pad device next to it.

“Back when these phones were produced, cell phones were very expensive.” I explained. “People who carried these needed to be accessible in a moment’s notice. Most people carried pagers, which were small devices that clipped to their belt. When someone wanted to reach them,

the pager beeped and a number appeared on the screen. The person usually went to a phone and called the number. But, a doctor or someone who might be needed in an emergency carried this heavy radio-like cell phone. He could be immediately reached on this device. No, he couldn't take photos or videos, and he couldn't send a text message and this device did not keep his calendar organized, but its original purpose was so that he could be reached instantly." I explained.

Students began to immediately begin to construct Venn diagrams on their tablets. They filled the circles with words that compared the former cutting edge of technology with the current communication technology. The only attribute that these items had in common was that they were able to make calls. I asked students to add a third circle to their Venn diagrams.

"What all might a cell phone be able to do twenty years from now that our current phones cannot do? What do you think they will look like?" I asked.

As students began to engage with this task, I began to check off in my mind what a valuable opportunity this was for my students to evaluate the evolution of an item they use daily and project how this same item might evolve in the next few decades. I wondered what might have been done with this cultural cache if another teacher or group had found it long before we did. I questioned whether or not the students and teacher who compiled this treasure gave any thought to the valuable lessons that would transpire as a result of their work nearly thirty years earlier. I wondered what a future teacher might want her class to learn from what we assemble in the event I am not present to orchestrate the whole thing.

My students ultimately decided that they wanted to include information about our historic presidential election where the first African-American was elected president, the economy that was resulting in so much unemployment, natural disasters, education, fashion, sports, music,

transportation, prices and toys. In addition, they wanted to include personal items that they would reclaim when the time came to open the capsule.

“Can we each have a Ziploc® bag to put stuff in?” inquired a student.

“Sure you can. I think if you have some of your personal items in that capsule, it will have even more meaning to you and it might make you really want to come back here when it is opened.” I responded.

In the next few days, my students and I began compiling artifacts for our time capsule. One student donated a broken GPS device, one brought in a pair of crocs, one donated the phone that her dad used before he upgraded. We included a Hannah Montana CD, sports memorabilia, Harry Potter books, and an iPod® and some electronic toys. I sent a letter to parents and grandparents asking them to write letters to their children, seal the envelopes and send them to school. We included those letters in each child’s Ziploc® bag with stuffed animals, field day ribbons, baby teeth, baseballs and ballet slippers. Each child was allowed to fill a bag with items that were personally significant. Within a week I knew we had more things to include in our capsule than space. Every other time I had buried a time capsule with a group of children I had a copper box and vault donated. This time my requests were met with cold indifference. The economy was affecting everyone and nobody was making generous contributions to schoolchildren. I knew we couldn’t use another trashcan based on the condition of the artifacts we found. I asked the adult “children” for suggestions as to what we might use to hold our capsule that would withstand the pressure of the earth and water. The gentleman from South Carolina suggested a chemical drum. It was a great idea! Those are designed to hold toxic chemicals without leaking! He even sent me a link to a website where I was disappointed to learn that the cost of a toxic chemical drum and overflow pack cost exceeded five hundred dollars. It

was disconcerting for me to reconcile that this invaluable learning experience did indeed have a monetary value; one that might prove cost prohibitive. The following day, the same gentleman emailed me asking for the address of the school. I responded and he told me that we would be



**Figure 16. Painting the new capsule**

receiving a delivery the next week via Southeastern Freight. At first we tried to figure out what he might be sending to my class. I worried that whatever it was might be wasted since we did not even have a container for the capsule. At the end of the week, a big truck arrived and delivered a chemical drum and

overflow pack to hold our treasures!

“Hey! It’s blue just like the old capsule!” a student exclaimed. Let’s paint it with an eagle just like the old capsule that the other kids did!” another student suggested. We were relieved to be given such a generous gift for our time capsule that would ensure that our contents would be in better condition. Again, I wondered why a man who no longer had any affiliation with Springdale School and did not even live in the same state would shoulder the expense of providing my students with a similar experience. This would be another question I would ask when I would interview the participants.



**Figure 17. Students play inside plastic vault**

As the day of our celebration approached, we continued collecting artifacts. Our research into the popular culture of 1980 identified several toys, styles and icons that were not included in



the buried collection. For fun we collected some of the things we identified like a Rainbow Bright® doll, Cabbage Patch ® doll, Rubik’s cube®, Jane Fonda’s workout album, Muppet ®figurines, Garfield the cat,

AquaNet® hairspray, an Add-a-bead necklace, and a Mickey Mouse® phone. We

thought these items might enhance our display of the muddy artifacts we found in the time capsule. My students enjoyed sorting and classifying the old artifacts with the new. How do you put a time stamp on something as timeless Mickey Mouse® or a Rubik’s® cube? As we assembled our display that represented 1980, adults who remembered that time period would stop and comment on fond memories and relate that they had a doll or stuffed animal, jewelry or fashion like those on display. Again, I questioned how others would perceive the current collection of artifacts when it is unearthed.

The day finally arrived when we would celebrate the discovery of the old and the compilation of the new time capsules. The “old children” flew into town, rented cars and hotel rooms, and reconnected with each other. When they arrived at school, they were bombarded by not only Springdale students but media outlets, school board members, local politicians,



**Figure 18. Display with additional relics representing 1980**



**Figure 19. The student body gathers to watch the ceremony**

school district personnel and especially their teacher. They were all so glad to see each other after a nearly thirty-year absence. They viewed the articles on display and each one remembered his or her contributions to the project. They nostalgically reminisced about how important they perceived this work to be at the time they were doing it and lamented that no one had taken the initiative to locate this capsule at the turn of the millennium as they had planned. Again, I wondered if they had any idea how much what they assembled for themselves would provide such meaning for my students decades later. While they viewed the artifacts on display, our



**Figure 20. Students bury another capsule**

student body and special guests began to assemble outside on the blacktop for a good vantage point for viewing the burial of the current capsule under the large shade tree.

During the ceremony, each of the “old children” was introduced and each one spoke to the student body, remembering fondly their

academic roots and the special fondness that they held for Springdale School. They talked to the students about the foundation for learning that was provided at this elementary school and elaborated on their own academic journeys. They encouraged students to believe, and dream but also to plan for success. They also told the students that they would remember this day many years from now as they had, and encouraged them to lay aside whatever they were doing in order to return to this place and enjoy this experience all over again. The students presented their teacher with a bouquet of flowers and spoke kind words about the class where this experience was born. The 1980 Mayor spoke to the group (his picture and message had been included in this

capsule) as well as the Superintendent of our school district. Finally, we interred the new time capsule.

My students spent so much time researching the culture of 1980 that they became proficient in world events, fashion, advertising, television and movies. My students also represent the school's Quiz Bowl team so they thought it would be a good idea to challenge the "old children" to a Quiz Bowl competition of 1980's popular culture on the afternoon of the time capsule ceremony. My learners were confident that they could whip the oldsters at their own game, even if they did not live during the time referred to in



**Figure 21. Former students win Quiz Bowl**

the questions. The "old children" graciously accepted the challenge and handily demonstrated that even though you grow older, you never forget the "good old days" and living in an era proves greater than studying it.

After a celebratory luncheon including all of the invited guests and retired teachers, the guests of honor toured the building and marveled at how differently classrooms are set up than when they attended elementary school. I engaged them in conversation about specific things they studied at Springdale had impacted them later in life. Every single response revolved around an experience rather than a skill.

As I continue to reflect on what I learned and how my pedagogy was affected by these learners, I must acknowledge that experience is the best teacher. My practice can only improve by being attentive to the learners' natural interests, following their lead and facilitating meaningful experiences that are becoming so rare in the current climate of education.



**Figure 22. Springdale Students 1980**



**Figure 23. Same students 2009**

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

My study is an inquiry into a serendipitous learning experience provided for my class of elementary gifted learners in 2009. From one of my students, I learned that a time capsule had been interred on our school campus in 1980 by the gifted class at Springdale School. We began looking for the buried treasure and found not only the time capsule but all of the students and teachers involved in the project. My students and I sorted, categorized, analyzed and compared the relics from 1980 and similar artifacts and events from today. Through this inquiry, I will explore why this particular learning experience was so significant to those learners that nearly three decades later they would travel great distances to revisit their academic roots and each other. I will further explore what types of experiences can facilitate lasting learning.

### **Landscape of Learning**

In this inquiry, I use Maxine Greene's (1978) notion of "landscape of learning" to describe the context of my study. Greene (1978) suggests that the purpose of teaching is to empower but as a teacher, I don't feel like I am given freedom to empower learners. In the current academic climate, schools are experiencing a crisis of learning. The emphasis on testing and accountability is reducing education to a skill set that can be measured on a single standardized instrument. Teachers are being held accountable for student performance at a level that threatens their employment if the student fails to demonstrate skill mastery at a level determined by someone else. This pressure deprives teachers of opportunities to help connect students with learning that is meaningful or timely or engaging to the learners.

Studying a previous era is not just a lesson in history; it is an opportunity to analyze a given situation and employ critical thinking to determine what precipitated a certain event, how to avoid undesirable consequences, or compare then and now and predict what might happen in

the future. Dewey (1900/1990) asserts “to study history is not to amass information, but to use information in constructing a vivid picture of how and why men did thus and so; achieved their successes and came to their failures” (p.151). Exploring how our culture has transformed over time is an exercise in recognizing that change is inevitable whether painful or pleasant. It allows for the examination of the speed at which our culture develops and progresses and the evaluation of the change as noble or dangerous. I intend to explore the essence of this learning experience from 1980 that provided rich cultural lessons for my students three decades later. Why do these students from 1980 remember engaging with this learning opportunity to the degree that they would set aside their busy schedules and travel great distances to reconnect with the relics they assembled many years previously and reunite with each other? Is this type of learning activity even realistic today in the age of standardized test scores and school reform?

Some educators view school reform as a carousel; ever turning and always offering a fresh view of schools as they exist and always bringing another initiative sure to be the solution that will resolve the problems that schools seems to battle as evaluated by society. Educators with substantial classroom experience have remarked that the carousel often brings the same approaches back again, only packaged differently and accompanied by renewed hype. I used to view educational initiatives as a carousel always understanding that if the current initiative were not successful, another one would be presented in another year or two, often before we had a chance to really evaluate the effectiveness of the previous enterprise. As I have learned about schools and initiatives, and how culture impacts schools, I view the educational carousel as more of spinning top, whirling so uncontrollably that the lines that define our approaches to reform have become blurred.

For centuries humans have lived together both cooperatively and competitively and whether they were privileged enough to be exposed to formal schooling or not, always managed to learn the skills necessary to survive a lifetime. In the last fifty years, however, an intense commitment to competition with other countries has driven the public outcry for education reform. "Fear has been the tool of choice in shaping the American curricular landscape in the post-Sputnik era" (Steeves, Bernhardt, Burns, & Lombard, 2009, p.73). The media has played a role in igniting public furor over the weaknesses present in education. In April, 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education presented *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* to President Ronald Reagan. This report contended that America was being eroded by the rising tide of educational mediocrity.

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry and science and technology, innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security and civility. (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983/2001, p. 321)

This report began decades of discussion about education deficiencies that were credited with putting America in an inferior position compared with other superpowers. Again this report disseminated by media, fueled the fear that our nation would be overtaken by previously inferior world rivals. A true Cold War document, it notably stated:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983/2001, p.321)

The document highlighted the academic shortfalls of American students and encouraged states to craft curriculum standards in many subjects. This effort failed when history standards were called into question so educators retreated to the relative safety of standardized testing (Ravitch, 2010). We continue to build lessons around standards for each subject and each grade and measure competency numerically.

At the time of this report, Ronald Reagan's education reform plan intended to offer tuition vouchers for students to attend private school and eliminate the Department of Education. In the swell of public furor over the findings of this study, Reagan had to back off his proposed tax cuts and funnel more money into education. Engulfed in the rising tide of negative reports, the nation's public schools landed squarely in the cross-hairs of the weapon used to reform education; standardization. "In the trade-off, our education system ended up with no curricular goals, low standards, and dumbed-down tests" (Ravitch, 2010, p.23). Ultimately our response to the crisis was met with mediocrity that only continued to intensify the problem we had set out to solve.

Within two decades, yet another national education reform effort re-ignited the public interest in student achievement. President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) attempted to eradicate the achievement gap by mandating that every learner will perform at grade level regardless of socioeconomic background or disability.

The act, which passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, embodies four key principles- stronger accountability for results; greater flexibility for states, school districts and schools in the use of federal funds; more choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been demonstrated to work. (U. S. Department of Education, 2002, p.9)



The mandates of this educational reform effort, while noble in their intent, have succeeded in heightening accountability but failed to produce the scores that substantiate the tremendous effort that has been instituted on behalf of students. One of the greatest complaints about this education mandate is that these initiatives were legislated without the resources to implement the directives. As a result, many states and districts have applied for grants from charitable foundations and governmental resources to support instruction. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has poured billions of dollars into education, not through technology as one might suspect, but through charter schools, nationalized curriculum standards, and teacher evaluation and merit pay. Districts so desperate for the resources to enact reform have willingly embraced the Gates Foundation's education agenda just to acquire the grant money (Ravitch, 2010). As a result of Gates' tremendous investment, he wields a tremendous amount of influence over how schools operate, how teachers are evaluated and even curricular decisions.

In the wake of the 2008 economic downturn, President Obama chose to allocate \$100 billion of economic stimulus money to education. Of that amount, \$4.3 billion was earmarked for education reform. These billions would be allocated based on a competition referred to as "Race to the Top." States applied for this grant money and were chosen based on their proposal to make radical changes including adopting school reform models to increase accountability, evaluating teachers and principals based on student test scores and encouraging the development of charter schools. Georgia was selected to receive \$400 million in grant money based on

Georgia's bold vision ... to equip all Georgia students, through effective teachers and leaders and through creating the right conditions in Georgia's schools and classrooms, with the knowledge and skills to empower them to 1) Graduate from high school; 2) Be successful in college and/or professional careers, and 3) Be competitive with their peers

throughout the United States and the World.” (State of Georgia, Race to the Top, October 4, 2010).

The school district I serve is one of the districts within Georgia that has signed on to align with national standards, tie teacher and administrator evaluations to student achievement and radically change leadership, teachers, and school operations in an attempt to turn around the lowest achieving schools with the ultimate goal being higher test scores.

Basing a tremendous amount of educational resource dollars on a competition where states promise to make radical changes is disconcerting to me as an educator and as a parent of school-age children. The competition that begins at the top level of government ultimately lands on young children. The pressure to perform on a single test on a given day becomes the focus of every learning experience every day. Students internalize the constant drum-beat of “this is important because it will be on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)” rather than “this is important because strong vocabulary makes you a better writer or estimating helps you get a good idea of how many without actually adding up raw numbers or this formula can help you solve scientific problems.” Children desperately want to please the significant adults in their lives and the emotionally distressing fallout from not achieving a predetermined score on a competency test is not a price I am willing to pay as a parent or as an educator.

The pressure, the promises, and the threats of poor performance evaluations all contribute to the culture of fear that has a chokehold on the way we offer education to students today. We are not encouraging children to explore their individual passions, we are not developing critical thinkers and problem-solvers, we are not offering students an avenue through which they can understand our world and the challenges we face. In the interest of efficiency and accountability, we are teaching what is tested, even though it represents a marginal amount of what is needed to

be truly educated. “By our current methods, we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking it only means drudgery, worksheets, test preparation and test-taking” (Ravitch, 2010, p.231). Our methods may indeed produce higher test scores but the scores are not worth much when you realize how little of what is important is measured. Education historian Dianne Ravitch (2010) suggests

If we want to improve education, we must first of all have the vision of what good education is. We should have goals that are worth striving for. Everyone involved in educating children should ask themselves why we educate. What is a well-educated person? What knowledge is of most worth? What do we hope for when we send our children to school? What do we want them to learn and accomplish by the time they graduate from school? (p. 230)

Ravitch (2010) asserts that it is only natural that we want students to be able to read, write and numerate, but we also want them to be able to think, problem-solve, demonstrate good character, face challenges, experience success, develop a model of justice and fairness, listen attentively, contribute to the conversation, debate respectfully, compose thoughtfully, analyze a situation, offer solutions, apply science and math to real-life situations and celebrate the rich heritage of our culture as well as appreciate and tolerate others. It is clear that “our schools are not going to evolve if we only teach what tests measure...Not everything that matters can be quantified” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 365). Further, relying on test data exclusively to measure teacher effectiveness will breed dishonesty and testing irregularities, it will cause dissention among teachers as to who will teach the best students and at worst, it will cause no teacher to want to work with students who have disabilities. Teachers are not lobbying to be exempt from accountability. In fact, most teachers appreciate classroom observations. The only fair way to evaluate teacher effectiveness

is to spend time in the classroom and observe the teacher's relationship with her students, her practice, and her commitment.

Standardized testing has brought with it the assumption of a desire to produce a standardized child. The gifted children I serve are almost lost in the attention of the classroom teacher because it is assumed that they will perform well on the test. Their intense interests should be embraced and explored rather than marginalized. It is my desire to help my students engage in meaningful learning but I often find myself called to substantiate why I am spending time on lessons that will not be measured on the test.

### **Key Research Questions**

I asked the following research questions: What kind of learning experiences can inspire learners to engage in active, meaningful, and worthwhile learning? What kind of learning experiences can inspire learners to work with teachers, parents, and the learning community in order to create inspiring learning milieus to cultivate a better human condition? By asking these questions I learned about the significance that the time capsule learning activity provided for the former students that facilitated such meaning that they would lay aside their busy lives twenty-nine years later to reconnect with their capsule and each other. With every group of learners I serve there is an opportunity for me to engage them at a similar level to create meaningful learning opportunities. I want to learn about the educational experiences of students that “inspire the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational workers--learners, teachers, educators, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers to work together to create culturally responsive, humane, and inspiring learning environments to engage learners in active learning” (He, Lee, Wang, Canh, Chew, So, Eng & Sung, 2011. p. 100) and cultivating a better human condition for all learners.

### **Autobiographical Roots of Inquiry**

Why do we teach? From the moment we enter a teacher education program, we ponder our own educational philosophy. We are on a mission to expose learners to the world. We desire to observe that light go on when the learner finally demonstrates understanding. We want to provide opportunities to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills. We are passionate about facilitating meaningful learning experiences in the lives of students. From the outset of our teacher training, we are drilled with the importance of skill mastery, high stakes testing and the value of making Adequate Yearly Progress. The university attempts to produce what schools value in its teacher training graduates but there are always esteemed professors who plant the seed of what really constitutes learning; the “*currere*”, the lived experience or the running of the course (Pinar, 2004, p.35). Before we are even granted a classroom full of learners, teachers are plunged into a dichotomous predicament; how to fulfill the requirements that are mandated by non-educators and governed by high-stakes testing, and how to create meaningful experiences that represent true learning for the students.

As teachers, how can we produce lasting, meaningful learning experiences under the constraints of the performance standards, high stakes testing and AYP? What is the most important lesson to instill in a learner? Is it love of learning? Is it problem-solving? Is it critical thinking? Is it math facts, states and capitals, historical dates and scientific formulas? Or, should we follow the lead of the learners in order to engage them with content that is valuable to them?

Some educators would argue that students have a real need to engage in dialogue about what is going on in the world around them while other teachers do not allow time to be spent discussing current events as they are not measured on a standardized test. We have experienced an educational metamorphosis; an attempt to equalize opportunity for every learner, provide

similar experiences for every student, and prepare every learner for the same post graduate objectives, all in the name of equity. This dictatorial approach to education has come at an exorbitant price to the learner. We do not consider the academic aptitude, the social or emotional issues, the student's interest, or the applicability to real-life when choosing what every student should know before graduating. We assume that one size fits all and every learner needs what the dominant social class values, so to ensure compliance, we will test every student using the same instrument and expect a beautifully diverse group of learners to achieve someone else's objectives at a level determined by someone other than the learner. This study seeks to explore the essence of the learning experience and what makes that experience one that lasts and one that the students will value long after they have left the environment we call school.

### **Participant Introductions**

Dan is the participant most responsible for helping us locate the time capsule. He had a sharp memory for its location, the contents and the people who contributed to it. He obviously considered his work on the time capsule important when he was twelve years old and continued to consider it significant decades later. He described himself as a social animal who surrounded himself with lots of friends then as now. He recalled spending seven critical years of his development with these same people and he carried that appreciation to adulthood. He romanticized about a childhood that was spent riding bikes and walking the neighborhood at dark, spending Saturday nights with Bryan watching favorite television programs and being competitive both academically and athletically. His passion and pragmatism was evident in his conversation. Dan graduated from college with a degree in marketing and is currently a business owner. Dan is married and has two children living in South Carolina. Dan is the benefactor who donated a chemical drum and overflow pack for my students' capsule.

Trevette was a genuine and sweet student who was loved by teachers and fellow students. Her mother, Mrs. Grenga was the seventh grade math teacher for all of these participants and they obviously revered and respected her as well. Trevette came from a home where education was valued. Both of her parents held Master's Degrees as well as her grandparents. Her grandfather was fluent in sixteen languages. Trevette recalled her childhood sentimentally, citing examples of challenges that she initially feared but when she conquered them, she felt so accomplished. Trevette graduated from college with a degree in business and is currently employed in medical sales. She is married with grown step-children, is living in South Carolina, and is very career oriented.

Bryan spoke very nostalgically about his childhood and the role Springdale played in his early years. He viewed this reunion through a very spiritual lens. He recalled being academically advanced since the first grade and eventually skipping a grade. He does not think that he gained anything by skipping that grade and recalls how painful it was for his closest friends to see him get his things and move to the class next door. Bryan graduated from Georgia Tech with a Master's degree in engineering and currently owns a business. Bryan married and settled his family within a few miles of the neighborhood where he grew up. He remembered showing his wife and children the school and location of the time capsule but it never occurred to him to try to find the other students and bring it up. Bryan has recently answered a call into the Episcopal priesthood and will be going back to seminary when his daughter goes to college.

Lee Ann was the student for whom the arts played such a critical role. She was transplanted in the south when her father became the Dean of the Law School here and while she felt different, she became close friends with the girls in her class and continues to treasure those relationships. She recalls fondly the play *Sleeping Beauty* and how much she learned by

participating in that production. She also had an artistic ability and she believes it was fed in the elementary environment. Lee Ann recalled loving to express her creativity in her writing and eventually graduated from college with a degree in English. After middle school, Lee Ann moved north and now has settled in Massachusetts. She is married with twin girls. Finally returning to her greatest passion, Lee Ann opened an art studio for children.

Stephen was the student who viewed this experience with a philosophical bent. While most of the participants recalled experiences, he recalled fondly many of the skills he learned in elementary school. He believed that those basic skills were the building blocks for all of his subsequent learning. He recalled being a self-motivated learner who loved reading about history. Stephen was adventurous and loved world travel. His love for learning led him to graduate from college and become a teacher. While his family still lives in Macon, Stephen married and settled his family in California where he teaches high school English. Of all of the students, Stephen was a particularly deep thinker. He was able to step back from the experience and view it philosophically. He recognized the culmination of the elementary experience as significant and he mourned the cultural situation that resulted in all of them going to various private schools in middle school. On the flight home from the experience, he wrote a letter to the editor of the Macon Telegraph, analyzing the experience, appreciating the people who buried the treasure and thanking the ones who brought this experience full circle.

Rhonda was the student who was the greatest people pleaser. She recalled wanting to do well and wanting to please teachers and significant adults in her life. While she was shy and quiet, she was very driven and it often required her to take chances outside of her comfort zone. She was very nostalgic about her elementary school experience and wished that she could repeat her experience for her own children. When she addressed the student body, Rhonda encouraged



them to try things they did not think they could do. She told students that you only grow when you try something new. Rhonda admitted that the relationships she developed at an early age were significant to her being and she thought she might like to be a teacher just because she liked the psychology of it. She went to the University of Georgia and graduated with a degree in business. She is married with three daughters and lives in a neighboring town. Rhonda enjoys a career as a pharmaceutical representative.

### **Significance of the Study**

There are several areas of social significance that this research supports. This study can have implications that will impact the field of curriculum studies, policymakers, administrators, parents, students and teachers. This inquiry will contribute to the field of curriculum studies by substantiating the argument that lived experiences provide the longest lasting education.

“*Currere*,” the lived experience (Pinar, 2004, p.35) is one of the canons of the field and this work will substantiate that doctrine. Curriculum scholars recognize that the experiences that provide education on a day to day running of the course are as valuable as fragmented facts deemed valuable by someone else. This inquiry can serve as a reminder that we must engage learners at a very personal level in order for genuine, lasting learning to occur and we have an obligation to those learners to answer their questions and satisfy their curiosities even if the subject is not measured on a test. Further, it challenges the current trend toward teaching only that which is measurable that is so prevalent in schooling today, and defies attempts to reduce complex, diverse students to bits of data which can be manipulated, twisted, compared, and heralded or defended in public venues.

Policymakers and administrators can use this inquiry to increase their frames of reference for the value of learning experiences outside of measurable facts. As long as we continue to

allow those who have no personal relationship with the learners to dictate what skills and facts are necessary in order to be considered “on grade level” we will continue to marginalize what learners could be learning if we allowed them a shred of ownership toward the content. If policymakers were educated on the value of the lived experiences and embracing the cultural proclivities of students, they may be more apt to concede that all learning should be valued, not just the learning that produces quantifiable data.

This inquiry is significant for our school as it brought the entire student body together with one objective; to celebrate time. Even though the students are together every day under one roof, there are few opportunities for every student in the building to participate in the same activity. Most classes have grade-level unity but it is rare for students to study or celebrate one theme. This study facilitated an opportunity for teachers at all levels of development to explain the past, present and future to her students in a context they could comprehend. Through this process, teachers who had previously scoffed at the notion of “wasting time” on cultural treasures from a previous era developed a new appreciation for the rich experiences that once were an integral part of the Springdale experience.

Parents and students can benefit from this research as it validates the value of building relationships with the learners. Most parents are far more interested in whether a teacher understands and appreciates the child with all his idiosyncrasies than whether she drills him with facts that can be evaluated. This inquiry substantiates the necessity of building relationships with the learner and allowing the learner to connect with the content at a personal level by allowing the student to take ownership for his or her learning.

This work is meaningful to me as I am passionate about providing significant experiences that constitute meaningful learning for the students in my charge. I am frustrated with the push

for equity that has resulted in standardized student learning at the expense of the wonderful opportunities to question, think and explore that present themselves regularly in day-to-day life. I hope to be able to substantiate that by following the lead of the learner, we actually facilitate significant and lasting meaning for the students I teach.

### **Introduction of Chapters**

My dissertation consists of a prologue, five chapters and an epilogue. In the prologue, I discuss how the project originated when a student shared that his uncle attended Springdale in 1980 and they had buried a time capsule on the school grounds. I tell the story of searching for the hidden treasure and how my students learned from the relics once the capsule was discovered. In chapter 1, I introduce the study and situate this study in my life and in my journey of learning. I introduce my participants as seventh graders and follow up with their educational backgrounds and their place in society twenty-nine years later. Finally, I outline my key research questions and situate this study in the field of curriculum studies.

In chapter 2, I explore the research on schooling and learning such as learning about learning (e.g. Schultz, 2010, Schwab, 1978), de-schooling society (e.g. Illich, 1970) and mis-educative schooling, (e.g. Ayers, 2001, Illich, 1970, Freire, 1970, Giroux, 2003, Kohn, 1999, Pinar, 2004, Rose, 2009, Taubman, 2009, Weis & Fine, 2003) how popular culture impacts learning (e.g. Brown, 1987, Daspit, 2000, Giroux, 2003, Grossberg, 1989, Kincheloe, 2008, Pinar, 2006, Reynolds, 2006, Weaver & Daspit, 2000) joy of learning, (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, Dewey, 1938, Liston, 2001, Luke, 2010, Goodlad, 1984, Rea, Millican, & Watson, 2000, Warner, 2006) how student apathy affects learning, (e.g. Coffield, 1981, Thompson, 2008, Walsh, 1981) liberative learning (e.g. Ayers, 2004, Ayers & Dohrn, 2009, Schultz, 2008, Taubman, 2009) and the significance of place (e.g. Casemore, 2008, Pinar, 2004, Sack, 2001,

Whitlock, 2007) as it relates to learning. I view each of these tenets of learning through Schwab's (1983) four common places; the teachers, the students, the subject matter and milieu. I argue that curriculum is not linear content but it can be found in the intersection between the common places. I explore an awakening curriculum where teachers can facilitate the types of learning opportunities that promote student engagement that has the potential to move them to action.

In chapter 3, I identify my theoretical framework as Maxine Greene's (1978) *Landscape of Learning*. I discuss Maxine Greene's (1995) *Landscape of Learning* and the "wide awakesness" (p.42) that is an integral part of learning. Too often, people view learning as the mastery of content rather than an aesthetic experience where knowledge is acquired. Greene's notion of "wide awakesness" challenges teachers to help the learner find the beauty and the lessons that are present in the most ordinary, day-to-day tasks and to see every negotiated relationship, every mistake, every encounter, every success and every challenge as learning. I use a combination of Oral History and Personal~Passionate~Participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry as my research methodology. Oral history will be used as the data relies on the memories of middle-age adults recalling an event from an elementary experience. While this relies heavily on their memories, they have an adult perspective to offer when evaluating the value of this experience to their educations. Personal~Passionate~ Participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry is an appropriate methodology as this work is intensely personal for me, compelled by the values and experiences I bring to the work. It is passionate based on my commitment to the students I serve and the experiences we share together. Finally, it is participatory because as the bridge between generations of learners, I am an integral part of the equation and my findings will

impact the way I interact with my current and future students. I explore three exemplary studies, Brian Schultz, Jane Elliot and Ron Clark. Finally, I discuss the challenges of the study.

Chapter 4 is used to tell the stories that the participants shared through individual interviews. Each participant viewed the same experience differently with a different philosophical bent. All of them held a nostalgic view of the experience and their elementary experience as it holds a significant place in the representation of their childhoods. They discuss the emotional tax of separation as weeks after this project was concluded, they all dispersed to various public and private school offerings around the city. They discuss an emotional connection to various teachers as they reframe the significance of this learning experience through an adult perspective.

In Chapter 5, I reflect on the study and explore six findings of this inquiry. I apply these findings to my own practice and explore my situation to modify my pedagogy. In the Epilogue, I discuss how this inquiry transformed my pedagogy and the responsibility I have to my students going forward. The findings of this inquiry substantiate my commitment to the learner to facilitate experiences that promote meaningful learning and purposeful living.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Learning About Learning

In this inquiry I draw upon a wide array of research on learning and schooling such as learning about learning (e.g. Schultz, 2010, Schwab, 1978), de-schooling society (e.g. Illich, 1970) and mis-educative schooling, (e.g. Ayers, 2001, Illich, 1970, Freire, 1970, Giroux, 2003, Kohn, 1999, Pinar, 2004, Rose, 2009, Taubman, 2009, Weis & Fine, 2003) how popular culture impacts learning (e.g. Brown, 1987, Daspit, 2000, Giroux, 2003, Grossberg, 1989, Kincheloe, 2008, Pinar, 2006, Reynolds, 2006, Weaver & Daspit, 2000) joy of learning, (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, Dewey, 1938, Liston, 2001, Luke, 2010, Goodlad, 1984, Rea, Millican, & Watson, 2000, Warner, 2006) how student apathy affects learning, (e.g. Coffield, 1981, Thompson, 2008, Walsh, 1981) liberative learning (e.g. Ayers, 2004, Ayers & Dohrn, 2009, Schultz, 2008, Taubman, 2009) and the significance of place (e.g. Casemore, 2008, Pinar, 2004, Sack, 2001, Whitlock, 2007) as it relates to learning. I view each of these areas through Joseph Schwab's (1983) four commonplaces of the school curriculum: teachers, students, subject matter and milieu. Schwab believes that curriculum is not just content, as most people believe, but actually the intersection between the four commonplaces. I find Schwab's notion to validate my belief that we must consider the entire environment and how each of the elements in that environment relates to each other when defining curriculum.

For most people, the mention of curriculum fashions an image of subject matter, pacing guides and prescribed performance objectives. Subject matter is obviously important but it is not the only element that is critical to the learning experience. The learner is not only measured by her intellectual capacity but also for her level of interest, background knowledge for particular content, and attitude towards the subject matter and the learning process. The teacher, who is

usually considered a salient feature in the learning process is often credited with being important based on her knowledge of the subject matter. While content knowledge is important, she must also have knowledge of her students, their backgrounds, their academic capacities, their cultural influences and their biases. In addition, the teacher must be a life-long learner herself in order to successfully fill that role.

One of the greatest impediments to teaching and learning is the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Teachers typically are drawn to students who are intent on pleasing them, but this requires initiative and action on the part of the child. When a student does not meet the teacher on her terms, that student often finds himself in trouble, uninterested, disconnected and usually failing. Schultz & Banks (2010) describe the posture of a teacher who is connected with the learner as “keeping it real” (p.48). This suggests that the teacher invest some energy in learning about the home, family, neighborhood and culture of the student in order to reach him or her. It suggests that learning about the student is more important than the content she is teaching. A successful teacher attempts to know her students, their families, the culture from which they come and what is important to them. “When school connects and relates to the kids, it shows what is on the students’ minds in every way. When this happens, kids want to be in school and are motivated by what happens in the classroom” (Schultz & Banks, 2010, p.49). Teachers should not expect a child, especially one who comes from an environment that is situated to distrust society, to value her or the content she is offering. If she makes a connection with the learner and allows herself to be drawn into the culture that supports that child, she will be able to make the necessary emotional connection in order to teach that child.

Finally, the learning environment must be considered for its contribution to the learning process. The community, the school, the classroom, subgroups within the classroom, administrators, and policy makers impact the learning experience.

Relevant milieus will also include the family, the community, the particular groupings of religious, class, or ethnic genus. What aspirations, styles of life, attitudes toward education, and ethical standards characterize the parents, and through their roles as parents, affect the children (as well as the character of what can and cannot be attempted in a curriculum. (Schwab, 1978, p. 367)

Curriculum scholars recognize that learning happens in the interplay of the public and private, large group and individualized instruction, engagement between teachers and students and content. Where there is living, there is learning. As we attempt to investigate learning and how schooling often impedes the process, we are urged to reclaim schools as spaces that inspire learners to develop according to their personal dreams and democratic aspirations (Rose, 2009).

### **De-Schooling Society and Mis-Educative Schooling**

From a very early age, we are socialized to believe that education is the way out of a particular circumstance and the avenue for an improved lifestyle. As we are products of compulsory education, we have been cultured to believe that learning takes place in the venue of school. It is within a classroom that the “pupil is schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new” (Illich, 1970, p. 4). It is within the confines of the school that we come to believe that the school is the avenue for learning and thereby achieving our personal objectives. According to Ivan Illich (1970), to de-school society, we must first acknowledge the two-faced nature of learning.



The insistence on skill drill alone could be a disaster; equal emphasis must be placed on other kinds of learning. But if schools are the wrong place for learning, they are even a worse place for getting an education. School does both tasks badly partly because it does not distinguish between them. School is inefficient in skill instruction especially because it is curricular. In most schools, a program which is meant to improve one skill is chained always to another irrelevant task. (Illich, 1970, p. 14)

Hegemonic influences impact what we believe about schools and schooling. As a society we are conditioned to believe that our status was afforded to us by way of our schooling and we should want the same for our children. Parents who are making these decisions often believe that what was good for them will be good for their children so the cycle repeats itself, ratcheting up the stakes with each subsequent generation.

Even before the emergence of high stakes testing and accountability

American business has been a major player in the contemporary school reform efforts. The motivation is straightforward: to urge the preparation of a skilled workforce. Different segments of the business community have been involved in curriculum reform via blue-ribbon reports, or have fostered ties with schools leading to internships, or have donated money and equipment. Some, like the Gates or Broad Foundations, have launched major philanthropic initiatives aimed at creating particular kinds of schools. And some have donated and lobbied for overtly political causes like school vouchers. (Rose, 2009, p. 53)

One has to speculate if the significant contributions made to education by the business community are purely philanthropic or serve to control what will be taught in school because the schools produce future employees.

Education is currently facing a measurable epistemological crisis. On the surface, standardization is touted as being fair and equitable to every learner. In reality, offering every learner the same content, in the same package and evaluated in the same way on the same day is far more marginalizing than fair. Teachers are encouraged to “differentiate” for student needs but what we ultimately achieve is more sameness. I liken this to requiring all students to wear eye-glasses or hearing aids whether they are needed or not just so that we can claim that we are providing equitable service for all learners. Instead of giving each learner what she needs according to her own goals, we allow someone else to determine what every learner needs to know and we go about the business of getting every learner to the same location using the same methods.

In *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations* (2003), Lois Weis and Michelle Fine recognize and lament this standardized education that students must endure, “The distribution of knowledge is highly routinized. . . at no point is there any discussion, much less serious discussion, of the ideas or concepts embedded within the original materials” (p. 93). It is through this limited display of information that students’ minds and ideas are limited rather than broadened. From the first day of kindergarten, teachers push children into a mold that someone else has designed as being an educated and productive citizen. As greater levels of accountability are applied, the scope of the curriculum becomes narrower until we are at a point where learning is reduced to a collection of unrelated facts that every learner must know.

A paradigm shift often results from the notion that failure is deserved (Weis & Fine, 2003); after all, everyone had the same exposure to the material in his or her shared classrooms. The essence of contemporary schooling stems from the idea that learners should be shaped according to a mold; the dimensions of which are dictated by inclusive curriculum standards and

measured through standardized assessments. Everyone should be able to pass the same test because the school experience of each child is based on the same framework. It sounds simple but the element that is not accounted for is the experiences that shaped the lives of the learner before she ever entered school or the experiences that contribute to her being outside of the classroom. Considering the variation of cultural influences present in every learner, standardization is not even a realistic objective.

William Pinar (2004) suggests that the purpose of education is to be an autobiographical journey of self-reflection.

The point of public education is to become an individual, a citizen, a human subject engaged with intelligence and passion in the problems and pleasures of his or her life, problems and pleasures bound up with the problems and pleasures of everyone else. (Pinar, 2004, p. 249)

This purpose cannot be reached with standardized curriculum objectives as every learner takes a different path to similar albeit varied destinations. The objective of the journey is to reach individual potential and self-realization.

In addition to learning the same things, schools have narrowed the focus of every student learning the same thing, in the same way, on the same day. This lofty objective has been met with failure repeatedly, but the objective has not changed, only the approach to the objective. Teachers are now required to “differentiate” the standardized curriculum. The learners are expected to demonstrate understanding of the content on the same standardized assessment but the teacher may deliver the instruction according to varying learning modalities. How is that any different? The learner is still responsible for the same objectives, on the same assessment on the same day!

This runaway train toward the benign objective of excellence has been facilitated by the public outcry for education reform. Fueled by economic special interests, legislators have taken steps into an arena in which they have no knowledge. Legislators do not make laws that govern how physicians diagnose or treat disease because they understand their limitations as to the knowledge of medicine. Why then, do they feel educated and informed enough about how we teach and children learn that they will legislate the manner in which we will execute our mission as well as evaluate our effectiveness? Some would argue that this is what Kohn (1999) refers to as a “commitment to excellence” while others tout it as a method of control.

Telling teachers exactly what to do and then holding them accountable for the results does not reflect a commitment to excellence. It reflects a commitment to an outmoded, top-down model of control and is reminiscent of Frederick Taylor’s scientific management method for speeding up factory production. (Kohn, 1999, p. 95)

I believe that this top-down manner of school management is more for producing an efficient method of teacher evaluation than ensuring that all students get a fair and equitable level of instruction.

William Pinar (2004) cautions that “intelligence is made narrow, and thus undermined when it is reduced to answers to other people’s questions, when it is only a means to achieve preordained goals” (p. 29). Pinar compares schools to a factory model with the students being products on an assembly line and the teachers being the workers. On the surface we are acknowledging that every learner is offered an equitable share of “knowledge” but producing identical learners does not promote the kind of revealing the truth that Plato suggests constitutes learning. Is this standardized academic model really about equity or is it hiding an agenda from those perpetually chained in darkness?

Paulo Freire (1970/1993) describes a system of education as an “in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 53). This banking method of education treats knowledge like a gift that can be “bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable by those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 53). By eliminating opportunities for students to develop inquiry and explore those topics which are most meaningful to their lived experiences and help them to make sense of their world, we are treating them as vessels to be filled with a prescribed set of standards that will be valuable to the dominant culture. This notion would serve to privilege someone else’s educational objectives over the learner’s and it is masking a social construction agenda.

The factory model is one place where we rely on power to compel desired results. Liston (2001) asserts that “the predominant metaphor for education today is the factory model in which schools are factories that mass produce future workers to perpetuate the current capitalist economy” (p. 199). To use the same method in schools is to view children as quality controlled products being fashioned rather than learners to be appreciated for what they contribute to a larger picture. Some education reformers argue that this issue is a problem of our own making. As if they are in charge of “quality control”, they cite a few examples of students who attended enough school to graduate but failed to master skills that they deemed critical to being a contributing member of society. In an attempt to prevent further substandard production, they legislate tight control of schools where a substantial percentage of the budget is spent. Lawmakers intend to get their money’s worth by maximizing efficiency, holding teachers accountable for student achievement and measuring productivity using a standardized instrument. Instead of teachers being responsible and accountable to themselves, the learners and the community, they are now responding to mandates and viewing learners as products to be

fabricated according to certain specifications and parents as customers to be satisfied and standardized test results as a measure of teacher quality.

The intense pressure to produce measurable results in students has situated teachers to be scrutinized not only by educators, administrators and parents but to the entire community as well. “These days the phrase ‘all children can learn’ appears in every major educational policy statement, along with the implicit demand that teachers ensure all students do learn” (Taubman, 2009, p. 180). For a teacher to balk at the notion that all the learners in her classroom will demonstrate mastery on the prescribed skills using the same evaluative instrument on a given day is to concede that she must believe that all children cannot learn. “There is a debate among testing specialists as to whether a test score—which is, finally, a statistical abstraction—is really an accurate measure of learning” (Rose, 2009, p. 48). Proponents of standardized testing believe that while a test might not be perfect, it is certainly an efficient way to measure a child’s skill mastery while simultaneously evaluating a teacher’s instructional effectiveness. Sadly, the scores are not used to plan instruction or support students. The test scores are also used to evaluate administrator effectiveness, compare school to school, district to district, and state to state. Somewhere in our need to compete and compare, the academic needs of the students are compromised. To this end, schools have adopted an “audit culture;” (Taubman, 2009, p. 88) a way of reducing every learner, every standard, every teacher, every administrator and every school to numbers that can be quantified and substantiated with data.

Even if efficient, the standardized instruments are flawed in a number of ways. First, standardized tests are culturally biased, favoring the culture of the dominant social class and measuring the narrowest band of cognition (Ayers, 2001, p. 109). You can be sure that if the children of the dominant class did not outperform minority children, the test would be abandoned

for a more “reliable” instrument. Henry Giroux (2003) even asserts that “if poor, inner-city children consistently out-scored children from wealthy suburban homes on standardized tests, is anyone naïve enough to believe that we would still insist on using these tests as indicators of success?” (p. 89). Second, asking a student to choose a correct answer among four possible choices cannot measure some of the most important objectives of education. According to William Ayers (2001),

standardized tests can’t measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, good will, ethical reflection or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. What they can measure and count are isolated skills, specific facts and functions, the least interesting and least significant aspects of learning. (p. 112)

Additionally, with so much emphasis being placed on the results of the test, we are sending a terrible message to the students about what we value in them as learners. Is a scientific fact or a math formula really more significant than initiative or judgment or critical thinking or the capacity to apply the formula? Also, student growth as measured toward testable goals is terribly unfair if the student is below the expected grade level. Even though the student may progress exponentially, she will never be considered as meeting expectations if she is behind. Finally, the authoritarian nature of data produced by multiple-choice instruments narrows what teachers expose the learners to. Students cannot necessarily apply what they have memorized, they merely have mastered the nuances of narrowing choices and guessing as much time is given to teaching students how to approach the instrument successfully.

The future of classroom instruction and pedagogy seems hopelessly depressing. It would be understandable if, within a few years, there were no teacher candidates on university

campuses and schools were once again resorting to alternative teacher preparation. The fact that there are still teachers in classrooms is a sign of hope that our profession will regain the respect that it once enjoyed. William Pinar (2004) explains the hope that can exist,

that is why we believe in education; we see how powerfully schooling crushes it, and yet, still, there is education, despite the schools. There is God despite the church, justice despite the government, and love despite the family. We educators must prepare for a future when the school is returned to us and we can teach, not manipulate it for test scores. (p. 127)

Sadly, the more technological we become, the easier it is for us to view learning as a quantifiable outcome. William Ayers (2001) reminds us that

Teaching is an act of hope for a better future. The rewards of teaching are neither ostentatious nor obvious—they are often internal, invisible and of the moment. But paradoxically, they can be deeper, more lasting and less illusionary than the cut of your clothes or the size of your home. The rewards of teaching might include watching a youngster make a connection and come alive to a particular literacy, discipline or way of thinking or seeing another child begin to care about something or someone in a way that he never cared before, or observing a kid become a person of values because you treated her as a valuable person. There is a particularly powerful satisfaction in caring in a time of carelessness, and of thinking for yourself in a time of thoughtlessness. The reward of teaching is knowing that your life makes a difference. (p. 24)

This kind of hope and the kind of outcome of which he speaks is what I am most interested in measuring.



### **How Popular Culture Impacts Learning**

Popular culture is the venue that provides much of the substance for the formation of identity and understanding of one's world and one's place in it. As a result, scholars must consider popular culture as a vital component of an individual's education, a form of "public pedagogy" (Giroux, 2003, p. 38). Public pedagogies are spaces, sites and languages of learning that exist outside of schools (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010). For too long, those with the decision-making authority in schools have fought the battle to keep popular culture and academics separate. Popular culture has long been perceived as a distraction or unscholarly diversion in schools. Only recently have some educators begun to recognize the significance the learner's natural interest in popular culture has to academia and have begun to exploit that relationship for academic connections. To effect change, educators must "forge an intimate relationship with popular culture" (Dasgupta, 2000, p. 165). This is an idea substantiated by others within the field of curriculum studies including Pinar (2006), who argues for "scholarly efforts to understand educational experience both in and outside of school" (p. 56), and Reynolds (2006), who points out "the curriculum that matters most to children and the rest of us is the culture in which we dwell" (p. 44). One of the hallmarks of an exemplary teacher is her ability to connect the content with the learner's world. Students will only retain information if they can assimilate it into an existing schema. Failing to validate any part of the culture or heritage is to sacrifice an avenue for teaching. Within the field of curriculum studies, there is an understanding that students should "encounter themselves and the world they inhabit through academic knowledge, popular culture, grounded in their own lived experience" (Pinar, 2004, p. 208). To create conditions conducive to education and real life application, teachers must know their students, and students must know themselves. Dasgupta (2000) asserts that "popular culture is essential to

understanding student voices” (p. 167). Daspit (2000) further contends that “student experiences are of tantamount importance” in their own education (p. 167). If popular culture is such an integral part of education, why then, do we insist that students leave their natural propensity for language, culture, art, entertainment, and technology at the schoolhouse door? I believe one reason for this resistance to popular culture is that the teacher, who represents one cornerstone of the curriculum described by Schwab (1983), is unfamiliar with the cultural emphasis as it relates to her students. Popular culture varies based on the frame of reference of the individual. Teachers certainly indulge their own interest in popular culture but it is often quite different from the elements that shape the culture of the students she teaches. If the teacher fails to engage with the popular culture that shapes the lives of her students, she forfeits a tremendous opportunity to connect with her students through the world in which they live. Popular culture is a medium through which a teacher can enter the world of her students and exploit their natural interest in their culture to achieve academic objectives. As a teacher, I have had greater success when I allowed students the flexibility to decide how they want to demonstrate mastery of subject matter. Allowing students to rap about the presidents, use an iPod touch® or cell phone to communicate outside the walls of our classroom or research about the life of a rock star, or communicate using *facebook* or *edmodo* only serves to achieve my instructional goals via an avenue where students can take ownership for their learning.

Many teachers experience angst trying to teach academic content against the current of popular culture instead of using the learners’ natural inclination toward their cultural interests to achieve academic objectives. The same reading comprehension skills can be taught using the popular *Twilight* books that are addressed using the classic pieces of literature and basal texts embraced by teachers. Weaver and Daspit (2000) stress the need to evaluate various types of

popular culture as text alongside more traditional texts, and Giroux (2003) recognizes popular culture as a “primary source of knowledge for young people” (p. 38). Educators know that for authentic learning to take place, the learner must be engaged with the content. Every learner is completely engaged in the various components of popular culture and it is not the teacher’s place to privilege one form over another or one situation over another. It is incumbent upon the teacher to value the learner’s situation within the culture and use it as a foundation for assimilating the content she is introducing. The study of popular culture is a way of understanding the “intersections of self and society...the school subjects and everyday life” (Pinar, 2006, p. 23). To bring popular culture into the classroom would be to validate what the learner already appreciates and use it to build a connection between the classroom and the world.

Grossberg (1989) asserts “unless one begins where people live their lives, one will be unable to engage with the struggles over larger and more explicit ideological positions” (p. 92). Educators must recognize that students’ lives are profoundly impacted by music, media and technology in order to facilitate the application of the academic content that is valued in schooling. Grossberg (1989) suggests that the task “is to identify the strategic sites of empowerment made available in forms of contemporary culture” (p. 114). One of the most strategic sites of culture that is incorporated into school is technology. Students today are digital natives and much of the activity that consumes their time involves electronic devices from computers to cell phones to iPods. Teachers have embraced computers, paperless homework and email from students, so why do social networking, texting, and recording devices present a threat to the academic focus of the lesson?

Ray Browne (1987) suggests that popular culture is practical to education. “It can be used to overcome illiteracy, to keep people in school, to encourage life-long learning and to energize schooling and teaching methods” (p. 1). Brown (1987) asserts that

popular culture is the television we watch, the movies we see, the fast food, or slow food, we eat, the clothes we wear, the music we sing and hear, the things we spend our money for, our attitude toward life. It is the whole society we live in, that which may or may not be distributed by the mass media. It is virtually our whole world (p. 2).

Delivering instruction devoid of any connection with the world in which the students are immersed situates the teacher to privilege some forms of culture over others. When a teacher does embrace the popular culture in an academic setting, she is more likely to privilege forms of culture that are aligned with her own. This is a very slippery slope. Just as we don’t want to give students a one-sided view of the content, we must also be cognizant of the multiple influences that comprise the popular culture and validate forms that are meaningful to the student even if it is something that the teacher does not appreciate. If we use the learner’s natural interest, whatever it may be, we can achieve substantial academic objectives.

Giroux (2003) warns us not to consider education and schooling to be synonymous.

School is only one site where education actually takes place. As a performative practice, pedagogy is at work in a variety of educational sites—including popular culture, television and cable networks, magazines, the Internet, churches and the press. As a powerful educational force, culture is now mediated through new informational and electronic technologies that define knowledge as either entertainment or as a largely new and oppositional way of engaging broader society. (p. 38)

Whether music, rap, television, movies, fashion or entertainment, elements of the popular culture can be used as tools for engaging the learners with the content.

Joe Kincheloe (2008) asserts that as a teacher, I “must possess a wide range of education in the culture: TV, radio, popular music, movies, the Internet, youth subcultures, and so on” (p. 3). To view any learning experience as valid according to today’s structure of schooling, I must seize every opportunity to engage with learners on issues of their culture because it is only through complete engagement that meaningful learning can occur. Facilitating dialogue about the culture with students validates the position they currently hold instead of focusing on what role they are being trained to hold.

So how do we know which elements of the culture will benefit instruction most? It is important that the educators know and understand their own positions within the culture and understand and appreciate the many situations that learners bring to the classroom in order to recognize the value of multiple voices. Guenther and Dees (2000) remind us that

we as educators, must turn on ourselves, and begin to read ourselves again, through whatever means possible, or we will fall into the trap that critical pedagogy has resisted since its inception; the trap of one reading, one agenda, one perspective, which however emancipatory it may appear, is devaluing and dismissing the multiple voices of our students. (p. 53)

Forasmuch as education has attempted to segregate high culture and popular culture, there is now a call to embrace the rich cultural tapestry that is present in every group of learners. We are encouraged to not only validate a situation as meaningful but to develop those elements of popular culture as an integral part of the lessons we teach. Educators would be wise to heed these

espousals to better involve their students in the curriculum by exploiting the students' immersion in popular culture and establishing connections with students.

### **Joy of Learning**

Many young learners are so excited about the prospect of entering school, that they cannot sleep the night before school begins. They have new shoes, a new backpack, a new lunchbox and tremendous excitement about the new adventure. They want to ride the big yellow bus, meet new friends, play on the playground, learn to read, and enjoy all of the trappings of this rite of passage that signifies "big kid" status. The anticipation and excitement with which these youngest learners often approach the adventure of school can be characterized as joy. In this case, joy is not synonymous with fun; it is an ontological concept associated with satisfaction and fulfillment. According to Liston (2001), joy is both an aesthetic and ethical concept. Joy is "a powerful way of coming to sense phenomena, in which and through which broad interpretations of our world become possible. Joy is a metaphor through which all the senses interpret the world" (Liston, 2001, p. 13). Warner (2006) describes joy as "the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying" (p. 7). Joy characterizes the anticipation and excitement the young learners already experience as they explore their world. Typically, by third grade, the learners are fully indoctrinated into the schooling process and attending school becomes laborious and regarded with trepidation. I question how I contribute to the deterioration of the joy that existed and is needed in order to achieve life-long goals.

Third grade represents a benchmark or gate-keeping grade for students in Georgia. By age eight, students are required to demonstrate mastery of certain skills and concepts in order to be promoted to the next grade. Third grade teachers are under intense pressure to ensure that students in her charge are prepared for the test that determines eligibility for promotion. Students

are grouped, categorized, and labeled so that administrators and teachers can offer intervention if they anticipate failure to perform on that test. Extra classes are “offered” in the place of playground time and as the pressure ramps up just before testing, some students stay after school and even attend tutorial sessions on Saturday all because of the “laser focus” on testing. When the student is the product of this kind of academic manipulation, it is no wonder that the joy fades so quickly. In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938/1998) posits, “What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?” (p.49). Dewey’s charge holds a serious commission for teachers. If in the process of “doing school” we destroy the spirit of the learner, their sense of wonder, and their desire to improve the human condition, can we really claim to have succeeded even if they do “pass the test?” Some would argue that we are not measuring for the sake of the student as much as for the sake of the school. “Selection, interpretation, and evaluation of knowledge are the core relations of exchange between teacher and student, and these are fundamentally embedded in subjective—but institutionally constrained—relations of authority, desire, power and control” (Luke, 2010, p. 133). The school represents an employer for administrators, teachers and support staff and failure to demonstrate mastery via the chosen instrument implies a lack of success for those contributing to the cause. There exists a tipping point where the skill drill and the testing focus becomes more about the ones charged with instruction than those responsible for learning.

One of the by-products that the standardization movement has produced is an extraordinary sameness within our schools. In *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) suggests that “Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions...Why are our schools not places of joy?” (p. 242). Sameness perpetuates boredom among learners. We give learners few

opportunities engage with their own passionate interests because time does not allow for the learners to explore anything that does not advance the mission of measuring proficiency. This is an unfortunate commentary when we consider that students spend the most productive hours of each day interacting with a teacher versus interacting with a parent. Parents don't consider that they are institutionalizing their children when they send them to school. In being socially obedient, they are perpetuating the hegemonic cycle that purports that school is the venue for learning what they need to know to become productive members of society.

In order to understand the ontology of learning, we must investigate the purpose of education. According to Liston (2001), "the purpose of education is traveling from point to point, not necessarily arriving at a given destination" (p. 201). This suggests that learning is a continuum on which the learner should travel, never having an end point. Liston (2001) continued to describe the journey model:

Indeed, I would argue that currently the destination for all students (with the exception of some special education students) is preset, and the only deviations allowed are minor detours for a few and variation in the mode of transportation...I maintain that some students are on supersonic jets, others are on the trains, others are on buses, and still others are on bicycles and some even on foot. Still the destination remains the same (acquisition of skills requisite to employment), although some may never get there. (p. 202)

It is clear that our society is focused on and investing in a future workforce rather than committing to facilitating the joy of learning. However, at least with this model of learning as a continuum, even the learners that are "below grade level" will still have access to success simply because they are growing.



As a teacher, I am committed to engaging the learners with the content because I find the greatest success when the students enjoy that to which I am exposing them. I recognize that I need to build new content on existing schema. This is often problematic because every learner has a varied frame of reference for new content. To facilitate immersion in new content, I will often approach new content playfully, posing questions and “thinking out loud” in a way that ignites some interest in that age learner. Serious play emerges as a useful mindset when attempting to create joy in learning.

Rea, Millican, and Watson (2000) define serious play as “a flexible balance of serious purpose and playful interest in learning” (p. 24). Serious play offers opportunities for students to engage with the curriculum in creative ways, which is one way to facilitate joyful learning. Students who are in classes that incorporate serious fun are encouraged to playfully push the borders of knowledge and comprehension and they create their own ideas (Rea, Millican, & Watson, 2000). Play is a generative activity leading to new understandings, promoting risk taking and building autonomy. Serious play is also credited with increasing the development of social skills and divergent thinking. There is a cycle of learning associated with serious fun—play-debrief-replay. Students begin by playing with the “big ideas”. This can be facilitated through role-playing, investigations or simulations. As students debrief, they explore the discoveries they made through play. Even though play can be open and still achieve objectives, focused play includes more structure. Every subject can benefit from serious play (Rea, Millican, & Watson, 2000). If teachers would regularly allow students to play with content first before launching into requirements, I believe students would experience greater joy with the learning process.

Joy in learning usually requires some ownership on the part of the learner. During a learner's free time, they make all of the choices as to how to spend their time. Some read for pleasure, some engage in physical activity, some play video games or surf the Internet. Every single option for spending free time requires something to be learned and new schema to be formed. One becomes a better skateboarder, a better chess player, a better video game player, a better guitar player by practicing it. These are learning opportunities that they engage in because they have they have a passion for it. This freedom in choosing facilitates real joy. Inside school, students have very little ownership about what they will learn. Someone else decides what he or she needs to know and begins drilling it at the expense of the learner's joy. It should not surprise us that teachers complain of unmotivated students (Wolk, 2008).

Flow is another concept that would prove beneficial to maintaining joy in school. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) suggests that flow is the feeling that emerges when there is a close match between a high level of challenge and skills. Like joy, flow is a spontaneous, effortless experience during which the learner becomes completely consumed by the task. During this engagement, the learner concentrates very deeply and has an awareness of the requisite steps needed to complete the task. During flow, the sense of time is altered and the learner will sacrifice other pending activities in order to master a self-imposed objective. In fact, the experience is so enjoyable that the learner will do it just for the sake of doing it. Most young children have spent their formative years in a continual state of flow, only to be abruptly interrupted by the rigid structure of schooling (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This interruption of flow matches the disruption of joy experiences by learners faced with the influx of skill drill and testing. In order to promote flow in schools, teachers should help students understand the relevance of what they are learning and encourage student curiosity. As students learn about

topics related to their passions, they learn other things that are valuable as well (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Scherer, 2002). The premise of flow is an appreciation for the moment and a deep understanding of what is being explored.

Joy is a powerful motivator. Joy can be maintained in schools if we shift our focus from the test to the children. Our current practice is stifling the development of a love for learning and thereby removing the possibility for joy. Where schools should be places for individual thinking, interpretation and creativity, they are mired in creating sameness at the expense of the joy of the learner.

I argue that the problems posed in education (and in society as a whole) are not mechanical or technical, but interpretive. Further, the solutions are not to be found in developing better ways of implementing curriculum, but through developing better metaphors that allow us to think differently about what we do. Thinking differently is the only way to become different. We cannot become different until we change the metaphors we use to help us interpret who we are. (Liston, 2001, p. 6)

The field of education is in need of a few new metaphors to interpret its place. We need to move away from the factory model, more recently referred to as the business model, which treats learners as products to be developed and made marketable to society (Liston, 2001). Students should be treated as individuals and teachers should be treated as professionals who recognize that every learner needs a different avenue to travel in order to accomplish their personal goals. If we allow learners to make sense of their world in ways meaningful to them, and facilitate opportunities for engagement with content that produces flow, and validate the learner for his contributions to the learning, we will no longer need to question how the joy of learning was compromised.

### **How Student Apathy Impacts Learning**

Apathy is as common as pencils in classrooms today. Ask any teacher to substantiate why her students are not measuring up and she will likely blame it on the student's attitude toward learning. This might be a valid argument if the student did not care about anything, but the most difficult realization to reconcile is the fact that the student is more interested in rap music, or fashion, or video games than American history or geometry. The fact that the student is interested in something should convict the teacher. If it is our responsibility to teach the learner particular instructional objectives, it is as much our responsibility to motivate them to learn.

Many teachers have an expectation that students should arrive in their classrooms with an intrinsic motivation for learning the content about which she is passionate. Some students are naturally motivated and would attend that class even if it were not required. This, however, is not the norm. The school climate is so regimented and focused on making Adequate Yearly Progress that the student is not as important as how she scores on tests or her attendance record. Before a teacher can expect a student to engage with the content, she must first motivate the learner. Sadly, it is easier to cast blame than it is to motivate a student who is apathetic toward learning.

Educators who place the onus for student apathy solely on the shoulders of the students and families fail to recognize the school factors that can lead to disengagement, frustration and low achievement. Often these educators' perceptions about what goes on in school differ greatly from those of their students. (Thompson, 2008, p.50)

Teachers often have a wildly different view of what goes on in school as compared to her students. She has a more mature perspective on what is supposed to occur at school as well as an employed interest in achieving the objectives she is contracted to teach. Students often view school as a social setting first and learning holds a secondary status. As such, they assign more

value to social interactions that occur at school than any standards on a teacher's agenda during a school day.

Relationships, expectations, instructional practices, curriculum, testing, discipline and racial tension all contribute to the negative attitude the student displays toward learning. According to Gail Thompson (2008), the relationships that students develop with their teachers early in their schooling have a tremendous impact on the student's perception of school. Students who have a positive relationship with teachers are more likely to display a better attitude toward learning, achieve at a higher level and even attend college. As for instructional practices, Thompson (2008) investigates research that suggests the teacher is one of the most significant factors affecting student engagement. In this research, the teacher has a fairly high opinion of her practice as well as how she is perceived by her students. However, the students evaluated her practice significantly lower. Rarely do students really believe that the teacher cares about them on a personal level and consequently were less likely to indicate that the teacher wanted to give them extra help in order to understand a concept. The curriculum and textbooks are often considered boring by the students but the teacher often believes she makes the dry content more relevant to the students' lives. Testing often has polar interpretations as it relates to students and teachers. Testing contributes to student apathy as the students fail to recognize the value that the test represents to teachers and administrators. Students believe that there are too many tests, the pressure to perform on the tests is too great, and that they were not adequately prepared for the test. When it comes to discipline, students often believe it is unfairly dispensed and much of their apathy toward school is attributed to their belief that they are being treated inequitably (Thompson, 2008). So, for all of the work we do to prepare engaging opportunities for learning

for our students, it is not enough to combat the apathy that they bring to the learning environment.

Foster Walsh (2006) addresses the difficulty of working with middle school students who are openly apathetic toward learning. As a professor of teacher education, he warns teacher candidates not to be knocked off balance by the “I don’t care!” attitude of middle school students. He focuses on the difficult emotional roller coaster that often defines adolescence and warns his student teachers not to embrace the “categorically absolute” statements that they wield as they attempt to articulate their apathy. Idealistic student teachers can easily become disheartened when they experience the frustration of student apathy and view it as a roadblock to their professional success. Walsh (2006) encourages his students to connect with their students on a personal level and initially focus only on what they *can* do in an attempt to head off apathy.

Given the challenging context, veteran teachers also develop defenses, giving advice or making statements like, “You can’t save them all. Don’t try.” “You’re not failing her, she’s failing herself!” “You’ve got other students to worry about. Concentrate on the ones who want to be here.” These statements have a measure of truth embedded in them, but lack care, concern, and empathy. They encourage young teachers to move to a safe distance. It may seem trite and simplistic, but one of the most powerful (and difficult) ways to reach the “I Don’t Care” student is to let them know you care while they are pushing you away.

(Walsh, 2006, p. 11)

Participation in this type of conversation only serves to increase teacher apathy, which will contribute nothing to alleviating student apathy. This cycle of negativity between all of the parties involved will only serve to broaden the gap between teacher and students. Student

teachers are encouraged to take a step back from the volatile situation and build trust instead of writing off apathetic students as losses.

Student apathy can be one of the most frustrating obstacles for a teacher. We often believe that we can't change a bad attitude but we must be able to work around the apathy if we are going to engage the learners. We often take the negative comments personally instead of segregating the "emotional roots from the personal attacks" (Walsh, 2006, p.15). Often, the frustration experienced as a result of student apathy will breed teacher apathy. Our training and the amount of time we invest in the lessons we offer our students in some way breeds a level of entitlement for the teachers. We desire the reciprocation that if we work hard to prepare the lessons, the learners should work at least as hard to receive them. We do not desire the responsibility, nor do we believe we can effectively make the learner care. The responsibility for apathy is batted around between teachers, parents, students, and administrators but "I would propose that blame for some amount of the manifested apathy must rest on those of us who instruct these students" (Coffield, 1981, p.28). In *Student Apathy: A Comparative Study*, Coffield (1981) substantiates the previous argument by Walsh (2006) that there exists a gap between what the teacher believes she is accomplishing and what the student is experiencing. The researcher suggests that apathy is developed when a person's meaning in life is compromised (Coffield, 1981). As teachers, we have an obligation to ensure that students are given every opportunity to associate the content with meaning in their lives. Particularly apathetic learners deserve particularly committed teachers.

### **Liberative Learning**

Much of my identity is attributed to what I contribute to learners in my classroom every day. "Teaching, at its best, is an enterprise that helps human beings reach the full measure of

their humanity” (Ayers, 2004, p. 1). This quotation by William Ayers is profoundly significant to me. It has implications far greater than whether or not my students met or exceeded standards on some standardized evaluative instrument. This concept holds me accountable for more than disseminating and measuring facts. I am required to engage the learner in dialogue that helps her understand her world and how she is situated in it. I am more effective if I produce more questions than answers in my students. Ayers and Dohrn (2009) remind me that I have an obligation to venture outside the scripted, homogenized curriculum and help learners to make sense of their world and their place in it.

There is no real contradiction between asking critical and probing questions of the world in front of our eyes and teaching academic skills. Posing powerful questions and pursuing them to their furthest limits doesn’t have to be mere musing—a dreamy kind of waste of time—nor does it have to compete with or become a substitute for skill-building. Indeed, the best teachers tend to tackle the latter with energy and commitment in the context for the former. (Ayers & Dohrn, 2009, p. 73)

The location of an elementary time capsule provided a unique opportunity for my students to engage in meaningful discourse about the progression and transformation of our culture over time. At the same time, I recognized that the students on the front end of this project considered this to be a significant element in their own academic journeys.

The enthusiasm I had for this serendipitous learning experience soon became clouded by the realization that I would have to defend the instructional time spent on these relics to teachers and administrators who are so focused on data and measurement that they are blinded to the rich opportunities that are presented on a daily basis for which the students already possess an intense interest. “In schools today, it seems that everything revolves around standards, accountability,



and measurement... These standards...create an awkwardness that students and teachers struggle with daily” (Shultz, 2008, p. 11). Narrowing what should be learned to what can be quantified on a single instrument on a given day does not account for the individuality or diversity of the learners and eliminates all of the rich experiences that provide students with valuable access to problem-solving and critical thinking. Brian Shultz (2008) cautions us that the value of the standard is minimized in the absence of purposeful learning. “Administrators, teachers and publishing companies all over the country seem to believe that by stating that the particular objective is being covered, it is automatically understood, realized, and applied by students” (Schultz, 2008, p. 12). “Coverage” is one of the most misguided notions in education. Just because the teacher has addressed the content is no indication that she should assess the content. More teachers should subscribe to the notion that the teacher has not taught until the student has learned. Addressing content does not relieve the teacher from the responsibility that comes from assessing and discovering that students did not master the skill.

While I initially did not know what was contained in the capsule, I did know that the artifacts would have a story to tell and that my students would be afforded a unique cultural learning experience by exploring the distinctive collection. I was also convinced that the lessons facilitated by the contents of the capsule would be worth the time we spent investigating how the former class of students represented their world.

Everything about the way we deliver schooling today has been reduced to numbers (Taubman, 2009). We have a need to quantify every act we perform and every service we provide based on those numbers. We no longer use the state test as a diagnostic instrument to guide instruction but as a means to facilitate competition between students, teachers, schools, districts and states. We collect data, disaggregate data, create “War Rooms” to display the data,

discuss data with parents and with children (who don't understand anything except that these numbers indicate that "I am not smart enough to please the significant adults in my life") publish the data in the local newspapers and use that data to compare one school with another. Numbers dictate which teachers are more effective, which students qualify for additional services, which schools get new technology, which families qualify for free or reduced lunch, which media centers get new books, which athletic teams get the premium players, which music departments get new instruments, and which administrators most closely comply with the vision of the district. Numbers determine Adequate Yearly Progress, school staffing, and program funding. I am not interested in drawing any more academic conclusions based exclusively on numbers. For this research, I want to be guided by the essence of the experience and draw my conclusions based on analysis of the narratives shared by the actual participants.

### **The Purposes of Learning**

One theme that is prevalent in the way we deliver schooling today is silence. The teacher typically insists that the students are quiet in an attempt to ensure that they are listening to her. Her goal is for the students to absorb every bit of knowledge she imparts. Inevitably that discourse facilitates the insertion of her beliefs and views of the content. It is not meaningful dialogue if the conversation is one sided. Paulo Freire (1970/1993) cautions that

it is not our role to speak to the [students] about our own view of the world, nor attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with [them] about their view and ours. We must recognize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world. (p. 77)

If the role of the teacher is to facilitate learning through communication, why, then, do teachers so often lecture a group of learners while insisting that they quietly absorb what she is offering?

To attempt to learn in a classroom setting like that is to become academically marginalized at a very early age. It is in the dialogue and interaction that the application of the learning actually takes place. “True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 73).

If critical thinking were the ultimate goal of learning, why would we impede the process by insisting on silence? Failure to allow for the interaction between the teachers, learners and the content amounts to what Freire (1970/ 1993) refers to as the “banking method of education” (p. 53). According to this paradigm, the teacher acts as a narrator as she mechanically deposits information into the student who has been relegated to nothing more than an information depository. For us to downgrade learning to a banking method, we would have to subscribe to the notion that

knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others...negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry. (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 53)

Knowledge cannot be held or assigned to another; it can only be acquired through the restless inquiry engaged by the learner. If we fail to facilitate opportunities that ignite relevant interest in the learner such that he engages in restless inquiry, we have ultimately failed to teach. A hallmark of Dewey’s theory of experience is the constant relationship between fact and idea.

Facts that fit and facts that do not fit require new theoretical explanations that, in turn, generate new views of the factual, experiential world with new facts that fit and do not fit. Growth in inquiry develops between the continuous interplay between fact and idea. (Phillion, He & Connelly, 2005, p. 299)

While curiosity is naturally present, questioning must be developed in the learner to facilitate knowledge that can only be acquired through experimentation, evaluation, modifying and reevaluating.

### **An Awakening Curriculum**

In my current position as a teacher, I am not regarded as an educated professional who can be trusted to provide meaningful learning for the students in my charge. I am managed as more of an employed practitioner contracted to communicate facts and measure a student's ability to choose the correct answer among multiple choices. The school district contracts with me to perform a service by which I am expected to ensure that every learner achieves at a standard level, regardless of his or her academic capacity, socioeconomic status, emotional stability, or personal motivation. The emphasis on equity sometimes masquerades as social justice but in reality it is more an efficient way to reproduce schools in the image of a capitalist society. I believe that the definition of fair does not suggest that everyone should receive the exact same thing from an educational experience but each learner is entitled to whatever life lessons apply to their own situation. While I am educated and trained to facilitate academic lessons within the microcosm of school, I am neither qualified for nor authorized to substitute my judgment for the learner's.

If school is a microcosm of society, then there is cultural capital to be earned and spent in the classroom setting. Michael Apple (1995) suggests that knowledge is a unique form of capital and "cultural institutions like schools...play a fundamental role in assisting in the accumulation of cultural capital" (p. 41). He describes schools as a social extension of the economic marketplace and asserts that a "hidden curriculum" (p. 43) actually marginalizes the very ones it pretends to help. When cultural capital is employed in schools it only ensures the success of the

learners who represent the dominant social class and prepares the others to “accept their place on the lower rungs of the [social and] economic ladder” (Apple, 1995, p. 61). Nowhere is this cultural capital more evident within a school than on Awards Day. I find it infuriating that the students who get the most awards, ribbons, trophies and certificates are the ones who usually came to school already knowing what we were supposed to teach them. The grandest awards, often accompanied by emblazoned plastic, shiny gold cups in graduated sizes based on concurrent years of academic superiority are the most coveted prizes. The assembly of parents and grandparents armed with cameras will receive bragging rights if their child is awarded one of these coveted honors or if they need a wheelbarrow to haul all of the signs of success. As a teacher of the gifted, I notice that most of my students are called to the stage repeatedly and applauded for their performance but I often question the motivation of administrators and teachers who generate this spectacle in front of a large assembly of people when they have already been evaluated as having a superior academic capacity. Most of those students don’t have to study, rarely make earnest attempts at assignments that they consider unworthy and demonstrate little growth from the place where they started. The students who require the most out of a teacher, intellectually as well as emotionally, those who perform below our expectations regardless of their growth during the school year, will be required to sit and watch this vulgar spectacle while being marginalized by the very ones who are supposed to be helping them. When I have objected to the spectacle of the large assembly that singles out students who don’t challenge us as professionals, I am dismissed with the justification that “the parents want and expect it.” The parents who so desperately want and need that kind of public validation are not the ones whose children struggle to learn to read, write and numerate. The parents who demand this very public awards ceremony are the ones from the dominant social class who want to

perpetuate their position on the social and economic ladder. Michael Apple (2004) substantiates this notion by offering

The cultural capital stored in schools acts as an effective filtering device in the reproduction of a hierarchical society. Schools partly recreate the social and economic hierarchies of the larger society through what is a seemingly neutral process of selection and instruction. They take the cultural capital, the habits of the middle class, as natural and employ it as if all children have equal access to it. However, “by taking all children as equal, while implicitly favoring those who have already acquired the linguistic and social competencies to handle middle-class culture, schools take as natural what is essentially a social gift, i.e. cultural capital.”(p. 31)

In essence, these parents demand such a spectacle be made of their children because they wish be filtered away from those learners who ultimately elevate their position.

The passion with which I question the motivation of some of the ways we operate within a school often situates me in a dichotomous predicament. As a professional, I desire to be given the latitude to teach what my learners need to learn via avenues they naturally embrace, but I am not regarded as a trained professional who can be trusted to make those kinds of decisions. I am employed as a practitioner who will implement lessons someone else has prescribed for my students when I genuinely want to maintain the posture of a *teacher*. In the implementation of schooling, we teach a lesson and give the learner a test, but according to “*currere*” (Pinar, 2004), the lived experience gives the learner a test that teaches a life lesson applicable exclusively to the learner. I don’t believe there is any arena in which I could substantiate exclusively either or. My best self must embrace the noble qualities of practitioner and teacher. Therefore, I must use

classroom venue I am afforded to facilitate meaningful lessons like the time capsule that will not only aid students understanding their world but will also move them to action.

### **The Significance of Place**

Any time a researcher undertakes a study in Macon, careful consideration must be given to the significance of place. To those of us from Macon, it appears that Macon is unlike any other southern town of its size. Its beautiful landscape of historic architecture and cherry blossoms masquerades the uncomfortable social class issues and a long history of racial unrest. A colorblind ideology is the privilege of those who want to move past the horrific details of our history without actually dealing with the ramifications of segregation, oppression and polarization that continue to avert progress in this town. Dr. Andrew Manis, a scholar at one of the local universities conducted a longitudinal study of race relations in Macon since the abolition of slavery. In his book *Macon, Black and White*, Manis (2004) convicts my hometown and some of its most prominent citizens of unutterable behaviors towards its citizens of color. As I grew up in this town, I never even heard anyone talk about race, though the signs of marginalization were all around me. I was not cultured to recognize disenfranchisement, rather I was taught to be colorblind, as if that were a noble quality. I believed the KKK was a group of narrow-minded haters in other southern towns like Birmingham, Alabama or Jackson, Mississippi. Not only was this organization alive and well in Macon, its membership of “white, American-born, Gentile, Protestant, gentlemen” (Manis, 2004, p.92) was led by some of Macon’s most prominent and historically situated citizens including politicians, business merchants, law enforcement officers and ministers. Generation after generation has been taught to ignore, if not reject entirely the history of subjugation and marginalization that was and is still so prominent in Macon. Integration was not a point of healing because it was executed on “white

terms” (Applebome, 1997, p.170). While legislating the integration of blacks and whites into arenas that were historically segregated did appear to facilitate equality, it did not reconcile the race issues; it just made the intense anger on both sides politically incorrect to acknowledge.

Only because of the influence of curriculum scholars am I am no longer “sealed in my whiteness” (Fanon, 1967, p.9) though any potential research subjects who grew up in this town have the potential to be. As a result, the place that is Macon, Georgia must be carefully considered as influencing the research. Macon is the South and the South is a place that influences the people who live there. The South is a region marked by a sense of nostalgia represented through story-telling (Casemore, 2008; Pinar, 2004; Whitlock, 2007). Southerners love to not only tell a story but also tell a *good* story. We are cultured to share memories with a positive angle over a painful one and to omit the details that suggest insensitivity or wrongdoing. “This phenomenon of denial and flight from reality involves, unsurprisingly, distortions in several spheres, distortions that undermine the South’s efforts to develop culturally, even economically” (Pinar, 2004, p. 95). This suggests that Southerners are imprisoned by our dismissal of the unpleasant facts of our history. Casemore (2008) submits that “our racist past is with us and is nearer to the surface of our everyday lives than the historical translation might suggest” (p. 29). Our place continues to influence our thought and decisions and our interaction with the world regardless of whether we acknowledge it.

Place is significant to research because it situates the participants into their unique setting and the multiple influences that shape our beings. The influence of place should not be ignored because it lends itself to the understanding of why people do what they do and believe what they believe. It provides a holistic view of the circumstances that influence the data that will be collected. Reta Whitlock (2007) posits that “concept of place brings the particularistic into focus



by linking the understanding of the individual to the social forces that flow through him or her. Place embodies the social and the particular” (p. 37). As humans are social creations, place is an integral part of who we are. Sack (2001) substantiates the notion of social creation of place by claiming that “place requires human agents” (p. 233). According to Sack (2001) there can be no place without us and as such, we cannot be without place. My participants are a part of Macon and Macon is a part of them. Even though most of them have moved to different places, the influences of their situation in Macon in their formative years continues to be a part of who they are and how they think.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical Framework

I view this work through the lens of Maxine Greene's (1978) *Landscape of Learning*. Maxine Greene suggests that it is my "incompleteness that summons us to the task of knowledge and action" (1995, p. 74). Her vision of "becoming" with all of the possibilities for my own pedagogy is what moves me to take this personal and passionate view of this work. "Maxine Greene reminds us...that freedom is linked to the capacity to imagine a better world, linked as well to a coming together of many people to identify deficiencies and obstacles. Freedom, then, requires consciousness and collectivity and action" (Ayers & Miller, 1998, p. 155). The current academic climate is one that is stifling for a teacher who is passionate about providing experiences for learners outside of the scripted standards-based lessons. The notion of freedom as a by-product of culturally significant dialogue and action is promising for me. Paulo Freire insists that

education as the practice of freedom...denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. (1970, p. 62)

American public education is in a state of crisis, one that I would not have recognized as clearly if not for the influence of curriculum scholars. During my quarter-century tenure as a teacher, I have witnessed the never-ending carousel of education initiatives perpetuated by the consistent outcry for educational reform. Legislators who know very little about how to teach enact laws that mandate what the expected outcome should be. Content, opportunity and measurement is standardized in the name of equity that gives substance to the notion that all learners are standard

and the variable in the equation must be the teacher. I do not know a single teacher who fears accountability, however, to place the burden exclusively on the teacher without regard to the rich diversity that is present in the learner's academic capacity, home environment, socio-economic position, societal influence, support system or personal motivation suggests that she can accomplish identical results and ignore the many variables that impact the students ability to produce those results. Greene (1978) describes learning as synonymous with cognizance. She describes the posture of learning as a "wide awakesness" (p.42). This was a moment of clarity for me as I studied the lifelong journey of learning. I have noticed that so many people are engaged in a routine existence that they fail to recognize all of the beautiful opportunities that each new day and each new experience offers them.

We are all familiar with the number of individuals who live their lives immersed, as it were, in daily life, in the mechanical round of habitual activities. We are all aware how few people ask themselves what they have done with their own lives, whether or not they have used their freedom or simply acceded to the imposition of patterned behavior and the assignment of roles. Most people ...are likely to go on in that fashion, unless—or until- the 'why' arises, ...and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement (Greene, 1978, p.42- 43).

Greene (1978) further describes this as "living with your eyes open" (p.43) and encourages us not only to view the ordinary experiences with wonder and amazement but to teach others to do the same. "Taking it for granted, we do not realize that reality, like all others, is an interpreted one. It presents itself to us as it does because we have learned to understand it in standard ways" (Greene, 1978, p.44). As teachers encouraging children to write, we often ask them to write about an experience. For most young learners, this exercise often resembles a recap of ordinary

events is an unspectacular way. Even the youngest learners who are often full of amazement and wonder are trained to believe that events are ordinary and can be recapped in list form. Greene's (1978) notion of "wide awakeness" challenges me to help the learner find the beauty and the lessons that are present in the most ordinary, day-to-day tasks.

This "wide awakeness" often becomes a natural way of thinking in our golden years. When the pace of our lives slows down and deadlines and due dates no longer dictate our routines, we become reflective and recognize what experiences enhanced our lives more than the pursuit of material things. We also learn to view lessons we learned from unpleasant, however defining occurrences as valuable to our existence. This reflectiveness or "wide awakeness" is a skill that can be taught at a much earlier juncture and will only serve to enhance our experiences, whether routine or spectacular and will facilitate a new appreciation for the value of everyday occurrences. Likewise, events that shape our world are worthy of exploring as a group of learners as our reaction to those events and our ability to understand them advances our education in a far more significant way than the measuring of facts or formulas. Too many people believe that learning only happens in a school setting. In fact, some of the least significant lessons are facilitated in a classroom. If learning is to be viewed as a lifelong, never-ending endeavor, we must help others become cognizant that education in the ordinary, the extraordinary, in the family, the community, and the world.

By this definition, a key element in teaching is facilitating critical thinking. If we accomplish this, we will not only empower the learner to answer any question or solve any problem that she faces, but we might also initiate something greater on the part of the learner that will benefit the student, the learning community or the world.

We hypocritically credit ourselves with teaching critical thinking in the implementation of schooling, but what most educators refer to as critical thinking, is in fact, problem-solving. We believe that we have taught students to think critically if we have facilitated multi-step thinking, but to be a true critical thinker, we must provide academic opportunities for learners to really question what we are doing, challenge why we are doing it and substantiate their argument based on the circumstances that learner brings to the classroom rather than a politically correct, predetermined answer that the teacher was guarding. Unlike problem-solving, critical thinking often ends in action. This usually cannot be achieved if our lessons are so defined that there is an ending point (usually marked by assessment).

This year I taught a lesson on water scarcity to my class. We discovered that over one billion people on earth do not have access to clean water and that a child dies every fifteen seconds from a water-related illness. I anticipated the difficulty of broadening my students' frames of reference for this global issue because we enjoy clean water on tap, both hot and cold. Even the most economically disadvantaged students in this country have access to clean drinking water. Not only do we have clean water to drink, we also wash dishes and clothes, bathe, flush, swim in, hydrate livestock and water our lawns with potable water. Further, water is our most inexpensive utility. Under such conditions, I wondered if I could make my students understand how clean water situated them among the most privileged people on earth. We viewed websites that showed villages in Africa where women and children were required to walk for miles each day to get even dirty water. We had already studied ground water so we knew that there was clean water under ground but they had no way to access it.

The discussion during class was rich with the understanding that clean water was necessary for life and that we were privileged to have it so abundantly. I felt accomplished by my

own standard of measurement. I checked that lesson off and prepared to move on. The next week when students came to class, one little guy was wearing a blue bracelet that said, "I'm giving water." When I inquired about the bright blue bracelet, he indicated that he had gone home and shared what we discussed in class with his family and he could not stop thinking about a problem half-way around the world. He returned to the website and signed up to build a well in Africa! At that point, I didn't know how much a well costs but I felt it was far more expensive than he was capable of raising. Visions of the difficult task of raising even \$500 for the school raced through my consciousness as I tried to wrap my mind around an eight-year-old boy signing up to build a well half-way around the globe. Because the teacher can't move on unless the students come with her, I returned to that website and learned that Winn had signed up to build a well for a village of people he didn't know and would never meet at a cost of \$6,500! As an adult, I know that if we can't solve the problem entirely we often don't do anything. I asked him what he was going to do if he did not get enough money to build his well. Without hesitation he responded, "then I'll get enough to repair a broken one. I might not be able to do it all but I can at least do *something*." I was briefly stunned but I marveled at his ambition, initiative and empathy. As he began to explain his plan for raising money, the other students in that class began to pile on enthusiastically, as if all they needed was for someone else to take the first leap.

As I observed passion turn into action, I let myself get overwhelmed with the thought of a class full of children actually thinking they could build a well. I thought they obviously had no frame of reference for how much money \$6,500 is! If I was tied to a pacing guide or testing hype, I might have quelled their desire to make a global difference. The students brainstormed ideas for which they could accept pledges to raise money ranging from performing extra chores to a read-a-thon to a foot race. After much discussion, they settled on carrying a gallon of water

everywhere they went for a day. I liked that idea because it not only would raise money through pledges but it would help them develop empathy for the children whose responsibility it is to carry water for their daily existence. I conceded that if my students believed they could make a global difference of any size, it was worth my endorsement. One class turned into four classes and ultimately the entire school wanted to carry water. A newspaper journalist wrote a story about the well and other schools signed on to help. Within a matter of weeks, the vision of an eight-year-old boy became the mission of an entire community. At the time of this writing, Winn has earned over \$10,000 and his well is under construction at Malinda Primary School in Kenya. It frightens me to think about how close I came to dismissing this child's ambition as folly after he has made a tremendous impact on that community and a small impact on the world. I believe this is the exact kind of immersion in the content that Maxine Greene (1978) refers to when she insists that the goal of learning is "wide-awakeness".

This study is not one that can be quantified and validated by calculating data. This inquiry will be a more fluid and interpretive qualitative study. Valerie Janesick (2003) uses the metaphor of choreography to describe qualitative research.

For too long, we have allowed psychometrics to rule our research and subsequently have decontextualized individual persons...It is time to return to a discourse on the personal...capture the lived experience of individuals and their stories, much like a choreographer who crafts a dance. (Janesick, 2003, p. 71)

I have often viewed the performance of a teacher as an artistically choreographed dance. There is fluid, purposeful movement, yet the motions can change during the dance if the "dancer" deems it necessary. On the occasions that I have had to teach the same lesson numerous times, the content is similar but the execution of the "dance" differs because the learners are not the same,

no matter how homogeneous the group. Teaching is a reciprocal process. “By listening and learning from the students, [the teacher] understands the need to rethink and reenvision [*sic*] the curriculum and what she should do with it” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 57). The momentum of the lesson cannot be predicted. Each new idea contributed to the conversation drives all comments following it.

That’s why a good teacher’s planning is only tentative. You can write all the behavioral objectives you want. When the dynamic of a good class gets rolling, you can’t know where you’re going to end up. You have to just trust that the learning has been worth it and that the kids have gotten something out of it. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 48)

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) offer a workable definition to qualitative research that frames the work I am attempting to do.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations... [and] involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that the qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials- case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional and visual texts- that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3-4)



This working definition characterizes the work that I am attempting to do by recognizing that there are many paths to understanding this meaningful learning experience and offers multiple avenues by which I can collect information to investigate and analyze the essence of the experience and its significance to the participants.

Quantitative research is heavily valued in the current data-driven academic climate. Activities and opportunities are not deemed worthwhile unless they can be quantified and substantiated by data. This time capsule project is not one that will lend itself to crunching numbers and substantiating its value as applied to the learners. A learning experience that was so meaningful as to bring busy, professional adults back to their elementary school twenty-nine years after they completed a project is one that demands investigation into the essence of the experience. This time capsule has a story to tell and by deconstructing this event with the participants I will gain a better understanding of what elements are necessary to facilitate meaningful, lasting learning for my students. I am proud to contribute work that does not substantiate the quantification that is so prevalent in school environments today.

My work will be informed by a mixed methodology of Oral History and Personal~Passionate~Participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) Inquiry. Because the impact of this elementary learning experience will rely on the memories of adults twenty-nine years after the experience, Oral History is an appropriate means for gathering data. Because I intend to use the data to inform my practice for my students, Personal~Passionate~Participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) Inquiry is a means for facilitating my evolution practically.

### **Oral History**

Oral history is steeped in the tradition of retelling and interpreting the events of the past. A participant who was intimately involved in the time being studied gives spoken testimony. A

researcher asks open-ended questions to probe the memory and attempts to reconstruct the story and interprets the memories according to a framework of inquiry developed by the researcher.

Oral history relies heavily on how one remembers events of an earlier time. “Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (Ritchie, 2003, p.19). When an oral historian interviews a subject, those memories are not only validated but given a voice. It is through oral history that stories are passed down through generations and a significant contributor to the way we emotionally connect to the events that shaped our beings.

Oral history research is not the privileged preserve of academic or professional historians, and groups as diverse as school students, day center residents or development project workers have all proved to be adept interviewers. We have drawn upon intellectual disciplines—including sociology, anthropology, psychology and linguistics- to better understand the narratives of memory and we have worked alongside museum curators, artists or media professionals to create public histories that combine sound, image and text. Most significantly and uniquely, oral historians speak to their sources, and this active human relationship transforms the practice of history in several ways, The narrator not only recalls the past but also asserts his or her interpretation of that past, and in participatory oral history projects the interviewee can be a historian as well as the source. (Perks & Thomson , 2006, p. ix)

Oral history as a research methodology gets its significance from the interpretation and retelling of the story as described by the participants. The researcher must ask questions that probe the memory of the subjects then make associations and draw conclusions based on the data she

collects. The researcher then retells a well-crafted story and makes associations based on the intersection of the data collected from the story and the knowledge of the researcher's experiences. The power of oral history lies in the power of storytelling. Whether an oral history project embraces and describes the story of one person's life or a collection of individual stories told together, the power resides in the meaning made of the storytelling and what we learn from the stories (Janesick, 2010) .

Getting the story has always been a significant part of oral tradition. The story as it is passed down through generations used to be the only way events were recorded for those who did not have the sophistication to accurately record it. When oral history was a new methodology, it was often exercised to interview scientists, authors and other people who were considered experts. Now researchers have come to recognize that everyone and everything has a story and this methodology is not reserved only for expert testimony.

The historical narrative, like all good stories, enables coherence to emerge from chaos. Its details add texture and vividness and tones to the characters and setting and actions. As contrasted to the "thinness" of journalistic accounts, stories of history are "thick." They enable the reader or hearer "to be there" with the narrator, to approximate the intimacy of witness to the actual events. It provides a structure while differing from that of the actual events, which offers meaningful understandings. In these narratives, individuals and their actions are known in company with their perceptions and motivations and the times and the world in which they lived. (Davis, 1991, p.78)

There is significantly more to this story of the time capsule than the surface re-telling of a group of elementary students who compiled a few papers and memories in a trash can at their

elementary school. The rich details that can be provided by the participants will give me data that will inform the work I will do with my students.

As I have explained my research and methodology to interested colleagues, they often ask, “Well when you find out about how a few students felt about one little project, what difference will it really make?” After recovering from the insult of the suggestion that if my study does not produce some revolutionary findings that will change the way education is viewed then it has no meaning, I suggest that our own history empowers us. “By reading or viewing oral histories, we seek that which is common in our own experience” (Janesick, 2007, p.116). My own practice stands to be improved by what I learn from these participants as my experience, their experience and my students’ experiences are interwoven in the history of our school, our community and our culture.

One of the criticisms of oral history as a research method is that the researcher is situated to be very subjective in the interpretation of the data. There is not a right and wrong assessment of the data that can be measured and as such, different researchers may draw different conclusions based on their own experiences and philosophical bent. When the interviewee asks to read the research that was facilitated by their participation, it is not uncommon for the subject of the research to balk and express that something they said had been misinterpreted. “The issue of interpretive authority is particularly problematic, for our work often involves a contradiction” (Borland, 1998, p.311). For example, feminist scholars interviewing a southern woman in the 1930’s will often interpret her plight as oppressive applying a modern-day paradigm to stories about a time when women were not supposed to be educated or assert themselves in any way. While the subject may protest that she had been misinterpreted, she fails to realize that her story is being viewed through the lens of another. While I asked questions of my research participants

in order to learn their stories, they really are not informed as to my position on the implementation of schooling so they may too feel like something they contributed has been misinterpreted. Actually, the subjectivity of oral history is what makes this methodology so appealing to me. I do not want to attempt to gather data that will be measured against someone else's standard. I want employ this dynamic and interesting methodology as a means of informing my own practice.

### **Personal~ Passionate~ Participatory Inquiry**

This research is intensely personal for me. I am fortunate to have twenty-five years of teaching experience and many of my students have contacted me long after they left my class with affirming words as to which lessons they recall as being most meaningful to them later. Gleaning such information can help me to create lasting learning opportunities for my current students. He and Phillion (2008) remind me that this work is personal, passionate and participatory. My research is intensely personal, compelled by the values and experiences I bring to the work. This study has ontological significance to me as much of my identity is attributed to what I contribute to the world via my classroom. It is passionate based on my commitment to the students I serve and the experiences we share together. Finally, it is participatory because as the bridge between generations of learners, I am an integral part of my findings will impact the way I interact with my current and future students.

This study will be a *Personal~passionate~participatory* (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry into an elementary learning experience that culminated in a meaningful opportunity for my students and significant fulfillment for me professionally. *Personal~passionate~participatory* (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry is a relatively new method of inquiry for researching an existential experience.

This work, done by a diverse group of practitioner researchers, educators, and scholars, connects the personal with the political, the theoretical with the practical and research with social and educational change. The principal aspect of this work that distinguishes it from other work is that the researcher is not separate from the sociopolitical and cultural phenomena of the inquiry, the data collected, findings, interpretations or writing. (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 1)

Personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry draws on the interconnectedness the values the researcher brings to the work, the passion for the content and the engagement with the study. This model is a perfect fit for my research as it is intensely personal. I draw much of my identity from what I contribute to the world by way of my classroom and my relationships with students. Therefore, this methodology is passionate for me because of the ontological significance that such learning experiences contribute to my being. I am a significant participant in this study as I represent the bridge between the two generations of learners at the same school. He and Phillion (2008) suggest that this form of research brings personal experience to bear on inquiry, seeing research as having autobiographical roots, as connected to, rather than disconnected from life; by thinking narratively, seeing experience as the starting point of inquiry, as fluid and changing rather than fixed, as contextualized rather than decontextualized. (p. 15)

I intend to explore the value of the lived experience of the adult participants in an attempt to validate the learning that has been so meaningfully provided for my current students.

Understanding that the lessons my students enjoyed were not in the objectives when they planned the contents of the capsule, I believe it is important to relate how valuable it became because it was analyzed according to curriculum theory. I don't want the participants to feel

detached from this project or to feel like celebrated onlookers. At the same time, I don't want them to think that we found something intensely meaningful to them and exploited it for our own purposes. I want them to leave this event understanding just how academically far-reaching their capsule was and how much meaning it provided to so many learners other than themselves.

As opposed to studies that focus on a specific phenomenon, this personal inquiry attempts to construct a bigger picture reflecting personal as well as social implications. This research does not attempt to produce conclusive findings of certainty but “aims for its findings to be well grounded and supportable, retaining an emphasis on the linguistic reality of human experience” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). The human experience is substantially worthy of exploration as an inquiry as the individuality of experiences are what shape and mold us as learners and ultimately as beings. As every participant brought unique experiences to the project as young learners, each one took divergent paths socially and academically shortly thereafter. As each one holds a different perception of truth, I will not attempt to produce facts of the accounts; rather I will maintain a goal of verisimilitude when assembling a much larger picture of the event being studied. Each participant can only articulate what this experience contributed to his or her own journey of learning. As a researcher, I will attempt to draw a broader meaning as it applies to learners, schooling and the emphasis on the investment of studying only that which can be quantified.

Personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry relies on narrative inquiry methods to gather data. Thorough questioning is critical to telling the story from the perspective of another. Robert Atkinson (1998) asserts that narrative “makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed and the confusing clear” (p. 7). As a researcher I will ask

probative questions to gather data that will assist me in understanding how the learners assigned such value to this experience that remains clearly meaningful to them nearly three decades later.

To some experienced teachers hyper-focused on measurable standards and assessment, the buried treasure that my students and I located amounted to nothing more than a few muddy bags of articles that represented the popular interest of students in our school almost three decades earlier. I believe that these artifacts have a story to tell and I want to attempt to legitimate not only the artifacts but the initiative of the young learners who facilitated this collection of cultural relics many years ago and in the process, validate the work of my students who were facilitating another snapshot in time to be analyzed by Springdale students in the future.

Although this study will be centered on six adult participants and their recollection of the significance this opportunity provided for them as young learners, this will in no way be a narrow study. I am required to use an innovative methodology to gather data and use a variety of analytic lenses to narrate the story from their perspective then use that data to apply to my own pedagogy as I facilitate other experiences for my current students. Susan Chase (2008) characterizes the type of study I am initiating as

an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods, all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars and narrated by the one who lives them. (p. 58)

I am excited by the notion that the stories these subjects have to tell will substantiate my feelings that these experiences are extremely important to a student's journey of learning, and we cannot dismiss their value because it cannot be assessed on a standardized test.



As a teacher I am troubled by the notion that someone else can better determine what a student should know than the student herself. The vast majority of the lessons we teach in school today are not prescribed by the teacher or the learner but by curriculum developers who never even come in contact with the learner. If we assign all of the curricular decisions to professionals who are not present in classrooms, and if we don't deviate from scripted lessons, we reduce our impact from teachers to practitioners. I wonder how we might empower the learner to make a few decisions about their own passions and objectives for learning that may ultimately result in stronger educational paradigms. Allowing the learner more ownership as to what she wants to learn may ultimately be the solution to the drop out problem that is plaguing education today.

Connelly and Clandinin (1991) assert that "narrative inquiry focuses on the human experiences" (p. 121). I want to explore the rich details that the students remember regarding the compilation of the time capsule and what implications they believed their project would have for future learners. I desire that my inquiry will lend insight to the value of the lived experience as well as the value of the learner led opportunity as significant and worthwhile to the educational process. This is an intensely human experience with cultural and societal implications if we can see something beyond the muddy bags. As a researcher, I am in a unique position. I am the link between the former students and the current students; the bridge from the school's past to the future. If I don't deconstruct this event for its academic and societal implications, the connection between the former students and the current students would be compromised.

A personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry is a good fit for this work because it requires more than just acknowledging what exists. The participatory element requires me to use what I learn to make positive social change, beginning in my own classroom.

Bryant Alexander (2008) describes the personal aspect of this work “as an exemplar and contributing model of...an individual’s critical excavation of lived experience and categorizing of cultural meaning” (p. 92). Each of the adults, while they obviously assigned meaning to this learning opportunity from their childhood, has not engaged in the kind of meaning-making that can be applied to other similar situations in school environments. Through conversations with the participants, I desire to learn what particular learning activities these adults value similarly and substantiate the argument that the lived experience is a true teacher. The participants admitted that when they were compiling this capsule in the seventh grade, they focused on themselves. They planned to come together again to unearth the treasure and reminisce with each other at best or leave it for archeologists to find many years later at worse. It has been through the critical deconstruction of this project that these adults have learned that what they created decades earlier had academic implications for learners today. As the link between the former, current and future learners, my own personal narrative will lend credence to the academic value contained in lived experiences.

Personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry has its roots in narrative inquiry. It draws from several research traditions including action research, teacher lore, self-study, teacher research and life history (He & Phillion, 2008). It seeks to analyze experiences that arise from the interaction of the researcher and participants. As experience is the catalyst for the inquiry, this methodology is fluid rather than formulated. My research is going to draw upon the narrative vein of personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) emphasize the practical character of this inquiry. “Narrative draws on classroom observation and participant observation of the practical, along with the bringing forward of personal experience in the form of stories, interviews, rules, principles, images and

metaphors” (p. 245). Though each subject experienced the exact same learning opportunity, each will have a different story to tell because each one brings varied autobiographical roots to the project. The narrative elements of personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry will be the most useful way for me to listen, interpret and retell the stories of the subjects as they articulate the value this experience had on their individual journeys of learning. This project will yield valuable data as each subject will be required to view the activity nostalgically and through the lens of their memory of themselves as young learners.

The participants will relay the stories as best they remember themselves and the experience as young learners and their narrative will be analyzed and applied to substantiate the way I currently facilitate instruction for my students. There are no expectations of fixed right or wrong answers. The interpretation will be developed through the lens of the researcher and the education, professional experience and understanding I possess will contribute to the way I interpret those stories. Bell (2002), asserts that

narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experiences by the imposition of story structures. We select those elements of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect the stories available to us. (p. 207)

For that reason, if ten people experience the exact same event, there will likely be ten different narratives recounting that event. Every person who recounts that event brings a different set of experiences to the occurrence and fashions their own meaning accordingly. “Narrative is not an objective reconstruction of life- it is a rendition of how life is perceived” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3). For that reason, I will need to carefully analyze each participant’s contributions and

recollections separately before comparing those experiences and drawing conclusions that will guide my pedagogy.

Personal~passionate~participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry is well suited for analyzing teaching and learning experiences as it rests on the assumption that the learners internalized some content to the degree that they would be able to not only recall it but have an opinion on the epistemological or ontological significance of the experience as it pertains to them. Everything that transpires in a classroom has the potential to teach something; even when it is not our objective. Through my example I teach children how to treat me and others in the class, I teach them what my tolerance level is for a noisy mess, I teach them how much they can depend on my meaning what I say. The way a student makes sense of her world is through experience. It is through evaluation and analysis that the learning is justified. Students who attempt to make sense of their world are the ones who are completely engaged with the content and are able to assimilate what they have learned to the broader context of their existence.

Phillion, He, and Connelly (2005) suggest that I view this work with an “experiential eye” (p. 2). If I focus on the value of the experience it will allow me to carry on inquiries with the first group of learners in a way that impacts the resulting experience for the current group of learners. Experience has long been credited as the greatest teacher. “Experiencing something is a linking process between action and thought” (Beard & Wilson, 2002, p. 18). A student’s way of seeing the world is what results from the aggregate of his experiences. Therefore one of the most beneficial ways we can spend the hours we invest in schooling is initiating meaningful experiences that matter to the learners. It is the reflection after the experience that the student applies lessons from the experience to his own personal world. The experience is then rendered the teacher. As with Shultz’s (2008) citizenship project, the ideas that were discussed among the

learners in his class were what actually facilitated the action that the students ultimately pursued. I can recall several instances where meaningful dialogue initiated action among my students, but not one of them was precipitated by lessons involving rote memorization or tests. These experiences were the result of dialogue about their place in and responsibility to the world.

Curiosity is natural for learners but questioning is a learned skill. According to Friere (1970/1993), “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other” (p. 53). Many students demonstrate an intellectual curiosity about a specific subject or content that is particularly meaningful to them, but in my observation, students consistently exhibit an intellectual curiosity about the world and their place in it. For that reason, I embrace every opportunity to dialogue about current events about which gifted learners have so many questions.

### **Exemplary Studies**

When seeking studies to assist in fashioning my work, I was immediately drawn to educators whose passion situated them outside the regimented pattern of delivering content that is so prevalent in schools today. I was interested in finding teachers who recognized that value of student-led learning and learner engagement in the process of facilitating learning. I immediately eliminated teachers who were only interested in direct instruction followed by assessment. I also eliminated teachers who can substantiate a methodology with research numbers alone. I want to learn from scholars whose educational paradigm is closely aligned with my own and who are willing to work within the same confining environment in which I teach but push the boundaries in order to facilitate meaning for their students. I chose Brian Schultz, Jane Elliot and Ron Clark.

**Brian Schultz: Citizenship Project**

In *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, Brian Schultz (2008) tells the story of how a citizenship project empowered his fifth grade students to become activists in their community and lobby for the new elementary school that they had been promised but failed to materialize. This is an excellent example of how a “teacher is afforded the opportunity to learn from, with, and alongside students, rather than being the keeper of the knowledge” (Schultz, 2008, p.139). This unconventional approach to delivering content substantiated how I believe learners make the most significant gains as they are directing their own learning facilitated by a teacher. “Often, especially in this age of high-stakes testing, teacher–proofing demands that educators deliver canned lessons and read from scripts to meet the supposed needs of their students” (Schultz, 2008, p. 135). Schultz admits that he did not function well in such a prescriptive environment and I don’t either. In my experience, I encountered only frustration as I tried to drill skills that supported a “standard” that was determined by someone else rather than asking the learner what they believed was important to learn. Schultz (2008) acknowledged that his “students became constructors of meaning, vis-à-vis questions they sought to answer, while [his] role as a teacher provided assistance and supported...their problem-posing and meaning-making” (p. 135). Because Schultz was following the lead of the learner, his class gained so much more knowledge than they would have if he had prescribed it for them.

As I read his story of success, I had questions in my mind as to whether or not he experienced the same pressure to “teach the standards” and “practice test-taking skills” that is so prevalent in classrooms today. In fact, he did experience such pressure and endured whispering campaigns from coworkers. Schultz carefully documented what he was teaching and aligned it to the Illinois Learning Standards. Like I do, Schultz (2008) believed that “ standards were

outcomes, rather than front-loaded objectives” (p. 129) so it was not difficult to make the connection between what transpired and what was expected, though he acknowledged that it was more easily “back-mapped” than predicted.

As the story of their complete engagement in the project developed, I acquired a relationship with students I did not even know based on his rich descriptions of their poverty status, academic prowess, and intense motivation to make a difference. With each chapter, as I learned how proficient these students had become with collecting data and gathering evidence needed to substantiate their argument, I became more and more convinced that these kids were going to get that new school. In the end, it was political implications that actually impeded the progress of building a new school for tenants of the dilapidated government housing project that was famous for gang violence and crime. Many teachers would have considered that failure to achieve the ultimate objective as time wasted but Shultz eloquently points out all of the lessons his students learned along the way from how to organize information on charts, how to create a petition and collect signatures of supporters, how to speak to the media, how to address politicians in a public venue and ultimately how to gracefully handle the ultimate disappointment. The telling of the stories of these kids who are living in abject poverty garnering the attention of local politicians, school board members, land developers and ultimately a well-known consumer advocate and third-party presidential candidate certainly situated these learners as substantial and contributing members of the Cabrini Green community and prepared them for future leadership opportunities. Schultz pointed out that these most valuable lessons were measured on the annual state assessment instrument but the use of the skills needed to achieve their own objectives was. Most importantly, “this project allowed them to see for themselves their multitude of abilities, intelligences, imaginations and worth” (Schultz, 2008, p. 155) If

Schultz had viewed this learning experience as a failure based on the fact that the students did not achieve their ultimate goal of a new school, the narrative would never have investigated the social impact of students and teacher creating curriculum together and learning alongside one another. Kristin Langellier (1989) suggests that narrative “does something in the social world...[it] participate[s] in the ongoing rhythm of people’s lives as a reflection of their social organization and cultural values” (p. 261). Schultz clearly taught his students skills that would be useful to their lives but even more, he awakened in them the confidence approach an overwhelming injustice against powerful political opposition. Further, Shultz’s narrative retelling of the events made an impact far beyond Cabrini Green, in the classrooms of teachers who were inspired by this story and have been encouraged to awaken the activist in students in classrooms across the country.

This story is an exemplary study for me because it appeals to me as both a teacher and a researcher. It substantiates that some of the most meaningful learning is not prescribed in a textbook or measured on a standardized test. It clearly champions the success the students encountered “along the way” and validates the teacher’s initiative to offer his students a rich learning opportunity beyond the prescribed text. Probably the most significant aspect of this study was for me as a researcher. When a project does not achieve the primary objective that we set out to accomplish, we often view it as a failure. While this project did not end with a new school for the kids, Schultz managed to point out all of the wonderful lessons learned as they worked toward that ultimate goal. This study demonstrates that the data that was produced is as valuable as the achievement of the ultimate goal.



**Jane Elliot: Discrimination Day Project**

Another exemplary study is that of third grade teacher Jane Elliot from Riceville, Iowa. In her all-white community, it was difficult for her to help her third graders navigate the events surrounding the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her students could recite his contributions but they clearly had no frame of reference for prejudice, discrimination or any of the other social implications that ignited the Civil Rights Movement. Elliot had the sophistication to distinguish between prejudice and discrimination. In her estimation “prejudices restrict the lives of the people who hold them, narrowing their vision and shrinking their worlds. Discrimination, on the other hand, cripples the lives of others—often millions of them.” (Peters, 1987, p.132). Elliot believed that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. died not because of prejudice, but because of discrimination. In an effort to demonstrate how easily discrimination can be embraced and how dangerous its effects were, she decided to simulate discriminatory practices among her students based on eye color. She informed the students that brown-eyed people were smarter and cleaner and therefore more privileged than blue-eyed people. Her blue-eyed students wore collars so they could be identified from a distance. Blue-eyed children were allowed to go first in line, enjoyed preferential classroom seating and to have longer recesses. Her students instinctively followed her lead in casting blame even taunting the students wearing the collars. The children who were the objects of the discrimination both assumed inferior roles and became angered and displayed violent behaviors. The following day, the students reversed roles. In two days, everyone in her class had been the discriminator and the discriminated. Upon completion of the exercise, she engaged the young children in conversation about the experience. The students were relieved that best friends could once again be reunited in friendship after the experience segregated them. They discussed how each role felt including the feeling of power

they enjoyed when they were among the favored and she helped them navigate the feelings of powerlessness when they were among the discriminated.

Jane Elliot's approach to teaching her students about discrimination ventured well outside the carefully worded text on the Civil Rights Movement included in the social studies book or measured on multiple-choice tests. Her students actually experienced the emotions that perpetuated a significant historical time period in our history. At the conclusion of the exercise there was no test to determine if the students could identify methods of discrimination but there was plenty of conversation that helped the learners navigate the emotions, evaluate the experience, and determine for themselves how they would react to discrimination in the future.

Jane Elliot's experiment was filmed for an educational documentary by ABC news. The intended audience of adult viewers could discern what was unfolding as the students reacted naturally and instinctively. Elliot did not have to coax them into being disrespectful or into reacting to the disrespect with volatile behaviors. Fourteen years later, students from that same group gathered as adults to view the film and to discuss how this experiment by a third grade teacher shaped the people they had become. These adults unanimously agreed that this simulation was one of the most significant learning experiences they had encountered in their years of schooling. Elliot believed that the "the reason it has lasted so long and has remained so strong is because it's something that they felt. It's something that happened to their insides" (Peters, 1987, p. 130). While there are a number of ways to teach content, the engagement of the students was the key element in applying the lessons in a way that shaped their beings.

Jane Elliot's story is most significant to me as a teacher. I first heard of Jane Elliot's experiment as an undergraduate teacher education student. The topic of discrimination did not make as significant an impact on me as the fact that simulation proved a meaningful way to

facilitate lasting learning. When I encounter students that I have taught over my career and they discuss something they remember about being in my class, they often refer to one of the simulations that I have implemented such as Mutual Fun economics or The Great Gold Rush or The View from Space astronaut simulation. The level of engagement provided by a simulation allows the student to take ownership in the learning as well as offers them multiple avenues to demonstrate learning other than questions and answers. When reminiscing with students I have never had them recall the significance of timed multiplication tests or memorizing historic dates. The events that stand out in their memory involve living history museums, performances, rain gutter regattas, bubble blasts, Odyssey of the Mind experiments, robot races, field trips, simulation activities and physical as well as intellectual immersion. The one thing that all of these significant experiences have in common is complete student engagement.

### **Ron Clark: Passionate Teaching**

Another teacher known for his non-conventional approach to learning is Ron Clark. In his book *The Essential 55: An Award-Winning Educator's Rules for Discovering the Successful Student in Every Child*, Clark (2003) describes how he came to education accidentally when his parents refused to continue to fund his adventure-seeking lifestyle post-college. He began as a substitute teacher in a rural North Carolina elementary school and remained at that school for four years. His love for adventure and challenge prompted him to leave his home and go to Harlem, an urban neighborhood in New York City characterized by crime and poverty. The class to which Clark was assigned was supposedly stacked with behavior problems, truants, students with learning difficulties and apathetic attitudes toward school. In his struggle to gain control of the group long enough to teach them something, Clark connected with the students on an extraordinarily personal level. He visited homes, tutored them after school and rewarded

compliance with his many classroom rules. He not only wanted his students to be a shared community of learners, he wanted them to support each other as a family would, insisting upon a plethora of rules about how to treat others.

When I first read his book of fifty-five classroom rules, I immediately balked at the number of rules and how difficult it must be to enforce such a regiment of regulations. As I read the rules, I recognized that only two of the fifty-five were even related to the classroom; the vast majority of the rules were actually lessons of character and how to live your life with respect. As I studied his rules I could see that he was using his influence of authority as a teacher to actually teach children what we often expect them to learn at home. In my career I have often heard teachers suggest that they were not responsible for “raising the students” only for the academic content. I believe that Clark’s commitment to his students on a level that was significant to them personally facilitated the academic successes he experienced. He recounts how he took over his first class in North Carolina. The substitute before him reassured him that he would do fine. “As long as you can affect the life of one child, you’ve been a success” (Clark, 2003, p. xxvi). Clark admits that approach is not sufficient. In his philosophy of education, teachers need the conviction to reach every student. “The mentality of reaching only one child isn’t enough” (Clark, 2003, xxvi). He cautions us not to draw comfort from reaching only one child. The harder the student is to reach, the more committed he was to bringing that learner under his influence.

The greatest difference between Ron Clark and other non-conventional educators is that he was intensely connected to the performance standards and touted his success as a teacher because it could be measured on standardized tests. When he had a list of events or dates he wanted the students to remember, he encouraged them to embrace their cultural proclivity for rap music or Double Dutch jump rope rhymes. He demonstrated a sincere interest in learning from

his students in an attempt to get them to embrace what he was trying to teach them. His classroom manner is spontaneous, enthusiastic, creative and electrifying. He invests as much in building students' character as he does teaching them academic content. Like Schultz, Clark awakened the students to dream outside the violent streets and poverty that defined their neighborhoods. He too facilitated opportunities for his students to gain confidence in their ability to perform.

While many people describe Clark as creative, unconventional, electrifying, committed or eccentric, he prefers passionate. "Passion is why teachers teach and why parents devote their lives to raising their children. It is the fire in our hearts and the determination in our minds to make a difference" (Clark, 2004, p. 242). He credits the teachers in his past for shaping the teacher he is today. Whether he remembers them for kindness, compassion, adventure, high expectations or no-nonsense discipline, he credits them for shaping his pedagogy. I am sad to say that I never had a single teacher in grades one through twelve who shaped my pedagogy. As I reflect on the teachers I had, I cannot remember one who personally connected with me or made me feel like I wanted to teach. On the contrary, my motivation to connect with children stemmed from my desire to give children an experience I did not have. I can, however, credit twenty-five classes of students for shaping my pedagogy and teaching me how to make significant contributions to the students I now serve.

Forasmuch as Ron Clark's success inspires me as a teacher, as a researcher I am left with more questions than answers. Clark enjoyed the same success when he taught in a rural North Carolina school but when he opted for the challenge of a class in Harlem, he became distinguished as a model for effective teaching practices. A highly celebrated charter school in Atlanta, Georgia bearing his name offers a creative, world-traveling academic experience to

mostly low-income, minority students despite expensive tuition requirements. His corporate benefactors include blue-chip companies such as Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, Promethian Electronics and Oprah Winfrey. He also sells books and Ron Clark Academy products, books speaking engagements and hosts expensive teacher training workshops at his school to support his enterprise.

As low income, minority students have been Ron Clark's ticket to tremendous success, I wonder if that has contributed to his exclusiveness to that population. I wonder if he or his senior staff considers themselves to be White Saviors of poor, minority students. While the students at his exclusive private school resemble the students in Harlem whose success made him famous, there is a significant difference that often goes unconsidered. Applicants must fit a carefully prescribed profile including behavioral requirements, academic performance and parental volunteerism. While it is still a noble enterprise to offer an amazing educational opportunity to low-income, minority children, the students he serves in his charter school are far from the challenges that were presented in his class in Harlem. Considering his success record with not only teaching academics but also investing in the character of mostly poor, black students, I wonder if he considers himself to be better suited for that demographic than a teacher who has a background similar to those students. I question whether he would enjoy similar success with students of a different race or class. Further, as he continues to sell books and train teachers, I question if his methods are easily transferrable to demographics that do not match the population he has chosen to sensationalize. I don't want to disparage the good work he does for his students, but the students he serves in his school and the resources that are available to them are vastly different than most teachers who seek his training.

### **Participant Profiles**

The learners from the class of 1980 represented a well-developed community of learners. They were in seventh grade; the last year of elementary school. They had all been identified as academically gifted and were being served by an itinerate teacher one day per week. Most of these learners had been together in the same learning environment since first grade. At that time, not much emphasis was given to individualizing education for students. Instead, they were assigned to groups based on a demonstration of ability. The highest achieving students were isolated from the rest of the class and served by a teacher who visited the school one day per week to provide advanced instruction. Because the group was small and their intense interests motivated others in the group, they developed a close relationship that facilitated the type of intellectual banter that is highly desired in a true community of learners. They admit to being competitive with themselves and each other. Their extraordinary motivation is evidenced by their accomplishments after they parted ways.

Each of the participants continued their educations by various routes including public and private high schools. All six graduated from college and assumed professional careers spanning the country. Among them are business owners, medical sales representatives, and teachers. Four of the six hold advanced degrees. I learned of their successes soon after all participants were located. Because they were all busy professionals, I did not have any real expectation that they would make time and allocate the resources to reconnect with a nearly thirty-year old learning experience. While I have a tremendous connection to the learners I serve, I had absolutely no influence with these professional adults and I could not offer them any incentive to return to their academic roots other than the fact that my students and I were in possession of the project they had sealed beneath the ground years before. I was pleasantly surprised as each one committed to

attending the celebration in their honor and the culmination of their project with the burial of another time capsule. Probably the most astonishing element was the generous offers that the former students made to ensure that my students would have an equally meaningful experience. We were planning to inter another galvanized trashcan but when we saw the condition of the artifacts, we began to look for other options. It was the beginning of the downturn in the economy. Where I had before been able to procure business partners to subsidize the cost of such a project, I was left looking for something very inexpensive that would protect our artifacts. Whenever I had buried time capsules before, local businesses contributed copper boxes, cement vaults and digging equipment. This time, I could not find a single business that was able to help. One of the former students sent me a link to a chemical drum and over-flow pack that he suggested would be a good substitute for a copper box and vault. I agreed but the cost of those supplies exceeded five hundred dollars, which was cost prohibitive. I thanked him for the suggestion but I told him that I needed to find a more affordable alternative. Later that week a delivery arrived by freight truck. One of the participants who fondly remembered the significance of that learning experience had purchased and delivered the necessary chemical drum and overflow pack in order that my students would have an effective way to store their artifacts safely underground. This was yet another clue that this activity was significant to those learners. If these middle-aged learners were not only willing to set aside professional obligations and allocate their time and money to revisit that time in their lives, they were equally interested in financially providing for the current students at Springdale so that their learning experience would be equally meaningful.



### **Significance of the Study**

This study will contribute to the field of curriculum studies through the exploration of what constitutes meaningful learning. As Plato suggested in his cave allegory, something's existence is based on the interpretation of the observer and another cannot impose his understanding of truth on that observer. In Heidegger's interpretation, Plato suggested that the essence of understanding

does not consist of merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were some container held out empty and waiting. On the contrary, real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to a place of our essential being and accustoming us to it (Heidegger, 1967/1998, p. 167).

This notion has a particular commission for teachers. If the one who has been liberated returns to the cave and makes known what he has learned from the essence of whatever was casting the shadows, he informs or reveals what he has learned from his understanding or perception of the essence. He can determine whether something is real, reflection or shadow. The problem is, only the liberated one has a frame of reference for what a shadow or a reflection is, as the shadow is the only reality the chained prisoner knows. Heidegger (1988) asserts that freedom is not just a matter of being unshackled, nor just a matter of being free for the light. Rather, genuine freedom means to be a liberator from the dark.

Plato's shadowy representation of humanity bound by its own ignorance of reality being unaware of its limited perspective is a strong analogy to how we perceive education today. We approach education today from the angle of filling that which is empty rather than liberating one chained in darkness. The time capsule was to most people a buried trash can filled with muddy bags, but to the learners who prescribed meaning to the artifacts as representations of their

position in the culture, there was significance. To the learners who unearthed it, significant meaning was applied.

True learning is only accomplished when nothing is hidden and the idea has the ability to shine as if brought into the light of the sun out of complete darkness, but true learning is not what we offer in schools today. Madeline Grumet (1975) posits that “whenever we speak of education, we are speaking of man’s experience in the world” (p. 5), not what we taught in a classroom. Most of what we deliver in the name of education could be classified in stage two of Plato’s cave allegory, where the prisoner is unchained and free to see only the parts that are allowed by the liberator. If we consistently offer the learner that which is prescribed by someone else and never empower the learner to see that which is hidden, we are not teaching; we are indoctrinating. Plato’s description of the fire’s light inside the cave being an off-spring of the bright sun, the need for unhidden truth is a sobering conviction of where we are today regarding schooling and education. Some of the most schooled citizens, while they are quite proficient in what they have been taught, simply do not know what they do not know. They are as imprisoned by their limited understanding as the prisoners shackled inside the cave, having only been exposed to the curricular viewpoint of someone else.

I am under no assumption that real education can be achieved by one-sided lectures and standardized tests as has become so prevalent in the way we deliver schooling today. If education is supposed to be about discovering truth, we have steered terribly off course.

Contemporary curriculum theorist William Pinar (2004) describes curriculum as “the running of the course” (p. 35) and uses the term *currere* to draw a connection between academic learning and the lived experience. He contends that learning is achieved more through the experiences provided by living than by a well-orchestrated lesson in a school setting. For that

reason, teachers should embrace opportunities for students to dialogue with each other in order to facilitate learning that is naturally present in a culturally rich environment rather than insisting on a silent atmosphere where she skillfully delivers a manufactured lesson. Dewey (1916/2009) posits that

communication is educative. To be a recipient of communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected (p. 6).

Communication changes who we are and how we think, whether we are the one communicating or the one learning from it. Communication is a bridge that facilitates learning. According to Freire (1970/1993)

Without dialogue, there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education. Education which is able to resolve contradiction between teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition to the object by which they are mediated. (p.74)

This fundamental need for students to dialogue and communicate is often squelched in an academic environment because of the notion that the student should focus solely on the teacher who is acting as the keeper of the knowledge and she is dispensing it as needed.

Madeline Grumet (1975) asserts that “*currere* examines education as it is experienced in the past, present and future of one biography” (p. 4). *Currere* is significant historically as the learner brings to the experience prior understandings and experiences and will be able to apply what is learned to future experiences. This does not suggest that what is necessary for one learner is necessary for all learners. It does suggest that nothing that is ever learned is wasted.

Pinar (2004) contends that *currere* is significant in the present as it “seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of his or her life” (p. 20). Learners constantly negotiate their position in the world by interacting with the environment. Madeline Grumet (1976) suggests that “*currere* is what the individual does with the curriculum, his active reconstruction of his passage through its social, intellectual, physical structures” (p. 111). *Currere* is not merely a noun describing an idea but a verb indicating action and transcending academic, social and cultural boundaries. *Currere* is significant for the future as Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman (2004) contend that “the future—like the past—inhabits the present...The student of *currere* imagines possible futures” (p. 520). This interweaving of the past with the present with the future through the lived experience is the foundation for the time capsule project representing significant learning for the former students who initiated the project, for the current students who studied what the former students compiled to represent their reality and the future students who might learn from what the current students compiled.

This means of viewing curriculum reminds me of the Möbius strip, a two sided quadrilateral that when given a half a twist and connected at the ends becomes a one-sided band. It has no beginning and no end, indeed no right or wrong way to examine it. From the moment of birth, we are learners, ever changing based on our interaction with the environment and our situation within the culture and it does not stop until we draw our final breath. As I recall some of the life lessons that shaped my being, I evoke memories of pivotal moments in my life history that fashioned me into the person I have evolved into, not an orchestrated lesson offered by a teacher in an academic setting. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche would suggest that most of those defining experiences were painful and as I recall them in my circumstance, they were. The happiest memories enhanced who I already was while the devastating, hard life lessons were

responsible for critically shaping my being, transforming me into someone who had not previously existed. Marriage, childbirth and academic or professional success, while fulfilling, only enhanced what already existed in me, while divorce, being the victim of a violent crime, and heartache associated with shame provided learning opportunities that revolutionized who I was at the core of my being and shaped my interpretation of truth.

William Ayers (2004) reminds us that “as human beings, we are incomplete, and we are aware of our incompleteness. We are on a voyage, on the make and on the move” (p. 40). Under this developmental paradigm, even attempting to standardize curriculum in any form is analogous to trying to strike a moving target. Knowledge is therefore fluid, taking the shape of the “container.” Many curriculum theorists aptly employ the metaphor of water to describe the curriculum of the lived experience. Mary Aswell Doll (2000) describes curriculum like “letters in running water” drawing on the Buddhist interpretation of fluidity and applying it to learning. She eloquently compares the water’s ease in movement and inability to separate into aggregate parts to letters carved in rock or written in sand. We may be able to impact the direction that water flows or how fast, but we cannot stop it from flowing like we cannot stop learning from taking place.

In *A River Forever Flowing: Cross-Cultural Lives and Identities in the Multicultural Landscape*, Ming Fang He (2003) uses the river metaphor to describe “a life that flows, as does a river, with its own forces, modified at every turn by the landscape encountered” (p. xi). She uses a river metaphor to explore three phases in her life and the lives of her participants. He also uses the river metaphor to create a new conception of multiculturalism perceiving different cultures as rivers running together to create sediment for a multicultural delta where lives of various cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups merge with their own currents (He, 2011). Her lived

experiences between her homeland of China during the Cultural Revolution and her place in western academia constantly shifted with each experience recreating her identity. As Michael Connelly (2003) notes in his introduction to He's *A River Forever Flowing*, "she writes, There is no home in North America for me. There is no home for me in China either. Perhaps my home now is something flowing in my thinking and in my life" (Connelly in He, 2003, p. ix). A cultural, personal and academic transformation of this magnitude is an artful representation of knowledge being fluid, flowing as a river.

In *Curriculum: A River Runs Through It*, William Reynolds (2003) uses the metaphor of a flowing, ever-changing river to represent curriculum as lived experiences, unique to each learner. His text challenges us to rethink the way we currently school our children and to encourage us to reconceptualize curriculum from standardized, unrelated skills to unique lived experiences. Experiences flow together as a river, and the learner is unable to separate the experiences from each other or change that resulted from the learning.

The time capsule that was located on the school grounds represented significance for the first group of learners because it held representations of that which was significant to them in their childhoods, and characterized their situation within the school, the community, and the culture. As the river of curriculum flowed through time, the contents proved meaningful for current learners as it provided an opportunity for them to explore historically the same school, community and culture that that is defining their own situation. The curriculum originally took the shape of the first group of learners but as time progressed, it took the shape of the current learners. The deconstruction of the experience and the analysis of the artifacts shaped me and my pedagogy, and finally, those same relics successfully bridged groups of learners across generations.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1972/1981) uses the word deconstruction to mean critically analyzing the meaning of a text or experience. Most people associate text with words that are read. According to Derrida (1972/1981), words are not necessary in order for reading to take place. Reading is the assignment of meaning to a particular signifier, such as the time capsule. If the former or the current students, administrators, teachers, parents or interested community members assign any meaning or lack of meaning to what has been assembled, lost, located and unearthed, that object becomes text. From Derrida's (1972/1981) perspective, the fact that the capsule exists makes it a text worth investigating. When I first encountered Derrida's (1972/1981) notion of the significance of textual experiences, I thought that it included only those things to which I assigned value. However, when I experience something for which I hold little value, I then recognize that I could not have evaluated that experience as unworthy without reading the textual signs that existed in the first place. This is why Derrida (1972/1981) insists that "indeed, there is no outside the text" (p. xiii). As such, failing to find the educational value in the collection of relics that we discovered on the campus does not mean that it ultimately has no value to the original or my current students. The fact that it exists renders it meaningful.

In order to bring the value of this text into the light, I must deconstruct the experience. As Barbara Johnson (1972/1981) notes in her introduction to Derrida's *Dissemination*, deconstruction is not a form of textual vandalism designed to prove that meaning is impossible. In fact, the word de-construction is closely related not to the word destruction but to the word analysis which etymologically means to undo-- a virtual synonym for de-construct. The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized

skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. (Johnson in Derrida, 1972/1981, p. xiv)

This notion refers to looking at polarities within the text; what is present as well as what is absent, what is nature as well as what is culture, what is truth and what is error what is historical vs. what is current.

To deconstruct the essence of experience of the time capsule, I must analyze more than just the value of the experience for my students juxtaposed against the perception of other instructional practitioners that the experience lacked value in advancing the objectives measured by the Criterion Reference Competency Test. I will analyze the essence of the experience for the learners who originated the project to hypothesize why this particular experience was so meaningful to them that they would readily demonstrate interest in helping us locate their treasure, and would be willing to set aside their busy professional schedules, board airplanes, rent cars and sleep in hotel rooms just to reunite with their capsule and each other almost three decades after they completed their “assignment.” Even after being informed of the condition of the artifacts, they were yet undeterred in reclaiming what they had helped initiate years before and perpetuating a similar opportunity for students with whom they had no personal connection. I don’t think this phenomenon would have piqued my interest as much if they all still lived locally or if it was found at a time when they didn’t have any other pressing obligations or if only one or two of the students responded to our invitation. As these six former students were spread out all over the country and had not seen each other since they graduated from elementary school, I considered them to be a prime group of subjects to interview to garner individual insights on the value they placed on this elementary experience. My dialogue with them during the celebration proffered one consistent theme; they felt a tremendous ownership in this project



that they sensed a responsibility to bringing the closure they had designed for it years before. One of the subjects eloquently stated “there is a part of me in that capsule!” (Dan Bullington, personal communication, May 15, 2009). That was the statement that fixed my attention on the possibility that an activity initiated in a classroom could have the capacity to alter the being of the learner. Each of the research subjects had a different story to tell but the uniting theme was that this time capsule was an experience that was memorable to them and important enough to revisit at all costs associated therewith.

Critically analyzing classroom experiences causes me to reflect on the transformation of my own pedagogy. A significant portion of my being is directly related to what I contribute to the world daily by way of my classroom. For the past quarter century I have been proud to be a teacher and while the financial rewards are indeed small, the ontological significance outweighed my desire to earn a substantial income. I have had many students return to my classroom all grown up to share their personal, academic or professional successes with me. I cannot put a price on the feeling that I enjoy knowing that after all of the teachers who have contributed to their academic journeys, they consider me a significant factor in their development. I recognize my fortune that the majority of my years have been spent challenging gifted learners and not anchored in a fixed set of standardized skills. I have the privilege of following the natural interest of the learner to achieve my instructional objectives but I must acknowledge that what I am doing in my classroom on a daily basis is quite different from the regular classroom teacher. In the years that I have taught, education has experienced some of the most dramatic changes that I never could have imagined when I began teaching. Many years ago when I was a regular classroom teacher, I enjoyed wide latitude as to what I could teach and how I could teach it.

Today, classroom teachers are following a prescribed curriculum that is so restrictive that teaching can no longer be considered an art but more accurately a practice.

### **Challenges of the Study**

While this study represents findings applicable to my pedagogy, it presents challenges to me as a researcher. The six adult participants represent a homogenous group of learners, even by 1980 standards. All of them are white and all are from privileged households with families that valued education. All of the participants were evaluated as academically gifted and all graduated from college years after leaving elementary school. Even though the school was racially integrated in 1980, Springdale was still a neighborhood school situated in a pocket of economic privilege in town. I am concerned that the adult participants are so enamored with the nostalgia of their elementary school and the romantic memories of their privileged childhoods that I will not get a critical view of the social, racial, economic and educational issues that plagued this city before, during, and after that time.

This study is framed around learning and why this particular experience was so meaningful that these successful adults would travel back to their academic roots to celebrate a project they began decades earlier. Because the questions are directed at events of their childhoods and they are obviously captivated with the nostalgia of their elementary school celebrating them and their project in such an historic way, I am concerned that they will view this event through rose-colored glasses and subsequently temper their answers to portray themselves and their learning experiences in only a positive light. As identified gifted learners, they are clearly competitive and each one appears to want to contribute something meaningful not only to my work but to the school as a tribute to its place in their developments. If the interviews with the participants fail to produce any memories other than happy, white-washed,

romantic recollections of the school, the teachers, and the project, I will not be afforded an opportunity for a true critical analysis of this event. I will address this concern by investigating what is not said as much as what is revealed in the interviews.

### **Summary**

This research, while it may be narrow in its focus, has tremendous implications for my own pedagogy. I measure my own effectiveness not by that of another teacher with different students but I am constantly gauging my work based on what I have learned from my students up until now. Even if I teach the same content or address the same objectives, my approach varies based on the students I serve. I am most interested in this research for how it can inform my own pedagogy and how I can apply what I learn to benefit the my current and future students.

## CHAPTER 4: WHAT TIME TEACHES US

### Welcome to Historic Macon

Situated in the heart of Georgia is Macon; a southern town not unlike most mid-sized southern towns. Interstate 75 is a major artery that spans from New York to Miami so anyone traveling from anywhere north to anywhere south must default through Macon. To a traveler who passes this way and does not know this town intimately, we look pretty darn good from the freeway. In the springtime exits welcome visitors with pink azaleas, purple wisteria, and more delicate pink cherry blossom trees than the entire country where the Yoshino originated. Interstate billboards boast Macon as *Song and Soul of the South* reminding those who travel this way that Otis Redding, Little Richard, and the Allman Brothers all began music careers right here in Macon. Downtown Macon's streets are lined with restored antebellum homes with white columns, iron gates and rose gardens. We are proud of the white marble buildings, romantic Victorian porches, and plantation-sized homes that were spared General Sherman's torch as he marched his troops to Savannah. Tour buses outfitted to resemble old-fashioned trolley cars take visitors on a carefully planned route to view our historic sites, museums, and in the spring, our magnificent display of blooming cherry blossom trees. Ever committed to education, Macon is home to three four-year universities, forty-two public schools and over twenty thriving private schools.

Macon residents pride ourselves in our southern hospitality, punctuated with brightly polished sterling silver, peach ice cream, and sweet tea offered to anyone who wants to hear carefully chosen stories of this romantic town. Being raised in the south, I have been groomed to show guests our finest manners and not to advertise any less savory details of our family or our fair city. Therefore, we would never show visitors the areas of town peppered with graffiti, run-

down crack houses, the gang-ruled neighborhoods, abandoned buildings with broken windows, or the bridges under which homeless men take shelter. We would gladly share information about the many houses and styles of worship available, as Macon is proud to offer a church on almost every corner. We would politely avoid questions from visitors about why a town this size might accommodate the exorbitant number of private schools but if that visitor were moving to this community, we would promptly inform them of the rumored history of racial violence that supposedly poisons all of the public middle and high schools and all but one of the elementary schools. All but two of the private schools are affiliated with a religious congregation in this town so the most politically correct answer to substantiate why you are willing to take a second job to pay private school tuition is that you want your child to benefit from a Christian education.

Springdale Elementary School is the single public school in Bibb County that does not receive Title One funds for having the prescribed percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced meals. Springdale is not an all-white school. In fact, its population is only half white, with the other half being black and other. There is quite a diverse population of learners as there are seventeen languages spoken in homes of Springdale children and there are at least seven different religions practiced by families of students. There are students who come from economically privileged homes as both parents enjoy professional careers to students who are living with family members because they have become victims of this economy and lost jobs and homes, but as a whole, this school still represents economically advantaged children. Springdale enjoys the benefits heavy parental involvement. The Parent-Teacher Club raises and spends a budget of \$30,000 per year. Every classroom has a room mother to orchestrate activities for the class and weekly signed-paper folders for the teacher. This elementary school boasts a nurturing environment with 96% passing rate on the CRCT. The hallways are completely covered with

instructional murals and the media center offers an enviable selection of books for checkout. From Pre-K to fifth grade, parents and students are proud to be a part of the Springdale family. However, upon completion of the fifth grade it suddenly becomes fashionable to investigate the many private school options as if to suggest that the public middle school cannot adequately serve students under the influence of hormones. The families for which tuition is beyond their affordability demonstrate an obvious parental anxiousness similar to learning that their child is addicted to drugs or has joined a gang. However misguided, the parents believe that if they must stay in public school, their child must be qualified for gifted services as there is some notion that the smart kids are somehow immune to all of the middle school nonsense. I believe that this trend represents a way to be exclusive in an inclusive environment. Parents openly make statements that the only way they will allow their child to continue in public school is if they qualify for gifted services because they want their child to be segregated from “the unwashed masses.” I find it curious that one day they are proud to be in a diverse learning environment and two months later it becomes completely unacceptable. This school district, with the exception of this small pocket of mostly affluent however diverse population, is largely urban. There are plenty of middle-class and affluent families situated in many of the school zones across town but with more than twenty private school options siphoning off that population, the schools are overwhelmingly occupied by low-income black students. Of all of the reasons that parents give to substantiate paying an exorbitant price for education in this town, race is rarely even whispered, because in this southern town, polite gentility supersedes discourteous honesty. Out loud, we attribute this socially defining decision to our faith. In essence, this town has re-segregated itself since the legislation that resulted from Brown vs. The Board of Education.

The truth is, Macon has a less than romantic legacy of racial tension that simmered beneath the surface from the emancipation of slaves until the Civil Rights Movement. The integration of the public schools ignited a wildfire of disharmony among citizens, violent uprisings and ultimately white flight that continues to this day. We can try to disguise that people of color were ever marginalized in our fair city and point to cities like Birmingham and Selma as examples of southern locations that suffered from civil unrest, but our majestic train depot that has graced downtown for over a century still today has “colored entrance” carved in the marble arch entry. The notion of bussing “colored” children into white neighborhood schools during Integration was so unthinkable that many churches established schools to avoid abiding by any federal judge’s orders to mix races and cultures and socioeconomic classes in our neighborhood schools.

In Macon, the actual number of private schools fluctuates wildly. Those passionate about opening a school tend to lose interest when it no longer benefits their own children so private schools open and close and home school cohorts form on a yearly basis. Several of these schools that were founded in the early 1970’s still exist today but claim to be founded on Biblical principles rather than racial segregation. Those schools now proudly boast enrolling a few students of color, especially since those students enjoy full scholarships and help the football team win games! Still, all of these schools have two things in common; exclusivity and tuition.

In recent years a variety of community organizations have attempted to bring together members of this community to facilitate dialogue that might begin to heal the relations between blacks and whites that has permeated our city for years. I usually get involved because I have some idealistic notion that eventually there will be nobody who remembers the turmoil of Integration and we will be able to move forward, however it is my experience that these attempts

usually diminish and everyone leaves believing that some things will never change. Black citizens return to their homes believing that they were not heard and white citizens remain faithful to their argument that they attend private school for religious reasons.

If you grow up in Macon as I have, people will invariably ask where you went to school. I used to find this inquiry strange as I have attended a number of schools, including every one of the universities in town and I believed it to be a reference to my highest level of education. It didn't take long to realize that the question always referenced my high school because where I went to high school immediately situated me in a social class that was important to understanding my background.

The students who buried this time capsule in 1980 spoke with such sweet nostalgia when talking about their elementary experience. They were a community of learners who were very close to their teachers and to each other. They recalled vivid details about school plays, field-day competitions with a neighboring school, and even the lunch ladies. Most of them attended Springdale their entire elementary career so they articulated that they really grew up together. Springdale holds a significant place in their childhoods.

They mentioned that the seventh grade was very significant because it represented the end of an era. They knew that their time together was limited and that when school started the next year, they would all be enrolled in different schools in the community. They hated to say goodbye. They wanted the little environment in which they felt so comfortable, so successful, and so validated to continue to be their safe place to learn. They wanted to leave their mark on their elementary school before they were all scattered to various high school offerings in this town. They buried a time capsule and promised each other they would see each other again...in



the year 2000. But, 2000 came and went and the capsule representing that important milestone remained untouched.

May 15, 2009. Springdale Elementary School, Macon, GA.

It was the day of the big celebration. My students and I were ready to meet the “children” who were responsible for compiling the cultural treasure we had unearthed and meticulously studied over the past few months. I would have the opportunity to ask all the questions that had plagued me since these former Springdale students had agreed to come back to their academic roots and finish what they had started. The “children” (all of whom were now forty-one years old) would get to visit not only their capsule but also their elementary school and especially each other.

The school buzzed with excitement the entire week before. Former teachers had been invited to share in this celebration and they were calling the office to accept the invitation and offer memories of the school when the capsule was buried. Central office Board of Education personnel, school board members, community leaders and former and current local politicians accepted invitations to participate in this celebration with the children of Springdale. A luncheon served on tables elegantly appointed with china, crystal and silver was prepared to honor the former students and retired teachers. A Quiz Bowl challenge featuring questions related to 1980 popular culture had been issued by our school’s reigning champions and the “children” accepted. Travel plans were being made. Current teachers were prepping their students for not only the impending ceremony but also the meaning of capturing this time in a capsule. Students were calculating how old they would be when this capsule is exhumed and wrote about all of the things they believed they would have accomplished in the interim. Parents and grandparents wrote letters to the students to be included in the time capsule that would not be opened for

another twenty years. School-wide, students were bringing in pictures, letters and memorabilia to include in the new capsule that would be buried at the ceremony. The school chorus was preparing to perform for the huge assembly of people. Jr. Beta Club ambassadors were getting dressed in their blazers and neckties prepared to lead visitors on tours of the building. Nametags featuring old yearbook photos of each of the guests of honor were constructed so that we would be able to identify grown-ups whom we had studied and come to know as children. Programs were being designed to highlight the guests of honor and their accomplishments since leaving Springdale, comparisons between 1980 and 2009, and the order of the ceremony. Tents were set up over the location we had chosen for burying the new capsule to offer shade for the guests of honor and those who were speaking at the ceremony. The Maintenance Department arrived with heavy equipment to dig a hole for the new capsule and roped off the area with caution tape to prevent curious children from accidentally falling in. Displays were set up to showcase not only the items that were contained in the capsule but other items that people had contributed representing the time period we were honoring. Media outlets demonstrated interest in covering the event. As the celebration came together, teachers who had previously scoffed at the notion of learning about a previous generation of students at this school and the culture that they embraced at that time suddenly became interested; or at least appeared to be.

I arrived at school early on the day of the celebration tremendously excited about meeting for the first time the “children” who had facilitated this amazing learning connection for my students and the opportunity to sit down with each one individually and get answers to all of the questions I had about why this activity was so meaningful to them that they would set aside all other business to return and celebrate with us. None of the former students had a current connection to the school other than the gentleman whose nephew had told me about the capsule’s

existence and he was the one who lived farthest away, in California. I was anxious to find out what else they remembered learning as elementary students and how they now view schooling as it is being offered to their own children.

I checked to make sure the ceremony area was set up, straightened up the display of time-treasured relics, gathered the final few items to be tucked inside the new capsule, orchestrated children who were participating in the ceremony, directed the student ambassadors who were snappily dressed and waiting to marshal the flood of visitors who had responded to our invitation. As I held the photo nametags in my hand, I hoped I would be able to identify the “children” when they arrived if for no other reason than to avoid embarrassment. This day was different. On an ordinary school day, there is a steady parade of children dragging rolling book bags down the hall en route to various classrooms. This day, children were excitedly moving about the building, looking at the displays, asking questions and checking out the steady stream of guests signing in at the office. Excitement associated with a joyous occasion penetrated the air.

It seemed that within a matter of minutes, the front hall of the school was filled with grown-ups unfamiliar to the students. I recognized central office personnel, the superintendent and a few local politicians but there were quite a few older ladies I had never met. I figured out that they were retired teachers as they were completely familiar with the building and embraced each other with hugs and laughter as they exchanged memories. I was looking out for the “children”; carefully examining every visitor who fit the age profile of forty-one years old. When each one arrived, he or she introduced themselves to me and began to smile as they saw for the first time the relics that they had left buried on the school grounds almost three decades before. From the moment I pinned the photo nametag on each honored guest, they assumed a “rock star”

persona. These were the “children” who had facilitated this learning opportunity not only for my students but for the entire school and these were the guests that had all began their journeys of learning in the exact same location as every student currently enrolled in Springdale.

As the lobby of the school began to overflow with people, guests were directed to the tent area set up outside. Classes were filing out to the blacktop to watch the festivities. The ceremony began with the Springdale chorus singing *God Bless America*, a cappella. The sweet voices of children singing a patriotic song added a nostalgic flavor to the event. The assistant principal welcomed all of the guests and I introduced the retired teacher whose original assignment made this event possible. She was grateful that her cancer was in remission and she was healthy enough to come to this event and she seemingly enjoyed seeing “her children” even more than we did. She mentioned that being able to see the students she once served all grown up and having meaningful and productive lives was one of the greatest rewards of teaching.

Each of “children” was introduced and spoke to the students assembled there. They were reminded of how significant this time was in their lives and validated the investment the teachers are making in each of them. They challenged the students to set high goals, try something they didn’t think they could do and believe in themselves. The mayor of Macon in 1980, the Honorable George Israel addressed the students as well as the School Board president and the Superintendent. At the closing of the ceremony, students lowered the new time capsule into the hole that was prepared and closed the lid. As classes filed back into the building, maintenance personnel filled the hole with dirt. As I stood over the freshly-turned earth I wondered if this capsule would have the same meaning to these children as it seemed to have to the previous generation of Springdale learners.

The retired teachers and “the children” were led on tours of the school by student ambassadors. Standard comments were exchanged about how small the school seemed as compared to how big it was in their memories, how much technology was available to today’s students and how different the classrooms were as compared to the open-school concept. “The children” could remember what subject was taught in which classroom, how Mrs. Grenga rewarded correct answers with chocolate candies and even noted that the media center furniture was the exact same tables and chairs that was there in 1980. As I listened to the nostalgic chatter I hoped they could remember vivid details I was so interested in learning from them. The lunchroom was busy distributing sack lunches to students because the dining room was set up for an elegant luncheon honoring the retired teachers, special guests and “the children.” This lunch was unlike any “the children” remembered. This was a catered meal served on fine china accented with silver, crystal and candles as opposed to Melmac lunch trays holding corn dogs or square pizza, tater tots and milk in the half-pint carton. While this elegant luncheon was being enjoyed by the guests of honor, students with every excuse in the world for leaving the classroom detoured past the lunchroom to get a glimpse of the festivities that were going on without them.

After lunch my students, who were the reigning Quiz Bowl champions of the county, were primed to challenge “the children” to a quiz match on the theme of 1980. These students were fast as lightning on those buzzers and had been studying the popular culture of 1980 for a couple of months so they thought they were going to easily whip the competitors for whom 1980 was ancient history. Questions about Pac-man, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Chia pets, Who shot J.R?, and “Where’s the beef?” caused the buzzers to light up faster than my students had ever seen. They furrowed their eyebrows, accused me of giving “the children” the questions early and

even protested that their buzzers were malfunctioning. The buzzers were tested and we resumed. The political questions about Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale and the Iranian hostages were equally as quickly snatched away from my students. My students not only lost big, they were seriously humbled. They were confounded by how those grown-ups so easily recalled what seemed like ancient history. My newly humbled students finally conceded that gifted grown ups were indeed smarter than a fifth grader.

The afternoon stretched before me and it was my turn. I wanted to talk to each of these participants and learn first-hand why this learning experience was so meaningful. The group sat in student-size chairs around the small tables in the media center reminiscing with each other while I talked to them one by one. I could hear the laughter and excitement in the voices on the other side of the room as they caught up with each other as if they had just been together last year. As I dialogued with each one, themes emerged that told a unifying story.

Though each of the participants was engaged in the same project, each one revered it with a different personal bent. Bryan approached the questions with a spiritual perspective while Dan viewed this experience passionately as if it somehow represented his whole childhood. Steven's perspective was more philosophical while Trevette's was more nostalgic. Lee Ann perceived this project to develop her passion for artistic expression and Rhonda appreciated the freedom and ownership she enjoyed in regard to this project. Even though each one approached the topic in a different way, the unifying theme was the emotional connection they made with this assignment. This was important to them in 1980 and that did not change twenty-despite the long stretch of absence that had occurred between them.

They seemed genuinely surprised by the level interest that their capsule facilitated in this community and the celebratory atmosphere within the school upon their return. Rhonda

repeatedly said she couldn't believe "what you did for us. It was overwhelming. I was blown away...absolutely blown away." Bryan articulated that he expected the celebration to be "more like a ribbon cutting...ceremonial" since we had said that we had already exhumed the trashcan and investigated the contents. He punctuated his experience by categorizing it as "a date with destiny. And it delivered!" Stephen offered, "I'm astounded at the public interest and the interest within the public school system...the fact that there are school board members, and ex-principals, and former mayors...that I never anticipated. I thought some of us would come back and just dig it up and have a couple of hours together. I never really anticipated a larger interest than the original few students." While they were pleased with the fanfare their elementary school prepared for their return, the shock that they articulated was associated with the way this project was framed as a child. As an adult, they could understand why we wanted to celebrate this learning experience, but for as important as they deemed it when they were children, they were shocked that it was perceived as valuable so many years later. Still, they were all flattered and completely unassuming.

Even though the emotional connection was the unifying theme, several sub-topics emerged as I talked to the participants individually. An egocentric view of the contents was evident throughout the group. While they were certainly glad that the contents of their capsule proved valuable to the learners in my class decades later, none of them admitted thinking that it would be of interest to anyone but themselves in years to come. Further, each one admitted that they had reframed the entire experience as an adult and had attached an even deeper meaning than how they viewed it as a child. Other themes that were repeated throughout the interviews included the emotional tax of separation from each other at the end of that school year, the joy of a culminating experience that might provide a reason for them to reunite in the future, sentiment

associated with childhood traditions and memories, and emotional connections they enjoyed with teachers.

### **The Emotional Tax of Separation**

In many places, students transition easily from elementary to middle school as the new campus only represents a larger, often more diverse group of learners than before. Students enter the new learning environment surrounded by those with whom they spent years in the elementary school. Teachers are different, expectations are different but they have each other to ease this transition as new faces are presented in large numbers. In Macon, however, there is a noticeable angst among parents choosing a middle school for their children. In social groups, extra-curricular classes and on sports teams, parents of children finishing elementary school whisper among themselves, inquiring as to whether they have made a “decision” for their child. This is not something new. In fact, these students from 1980 discussed how they faced leaving Springdale with great trepidation. These participants, having grown up in the south, were obviously groomed to not articulate why everyone seemed to choose private school after graduating from public elementary. They spoke with great passion when they discussed the closeness they enjoyed as a community of learners and the teachers and experiences they remembered fondly. Forasmuch as they wished their time together was not going to end, they seemed resigned to the fact that was to be expected. Twelve-year-olds aren’t typically charged with weighty decisions like where they will go to school, so they ultimately became pawns in a social construction game played by adults. Within a few weeks of burying the time capsule documenting their culture in 1980, they graduated, went on a class trip to Disney World, then concentrated on forging new relationships in various schools around town. Out of the six, one went to public school and five went to private school. By graduation from high school, they were



all separated and lost touch with each other. Over the years, they may have come in contact with one or two people from their elementary experience, but it was rare since they had all moved away. Now, almost three decades later, only two of them live within a two hundred mile radius of Springdale and one of those lives within two miles of the elementary school he attended.

Dan offered “I don’t really know how to explain this to you...but the group that buried this time capsule...we had been together for seven years. This wasn’t just a class that stuck something in the ground and came back twenty years later to dig it up. Bryan and I spent every single Saturday night together at one of each other’s houses...You know in high school you only go four years together but at Springdale, we were together for seven years...your formative years...so you take all of that back story and all of that tidal wave of emotions and then you bookmark it with something like this. We all split up...so it is almost like [the impact of] a tremendous freight train.”

Having such a long absence from each other, I was intrigued by the banter among them as each member of that group was located. Modern technology was instrumental in helping them reconnect and I briefly thought that they were so engaged with catching up with each other that they might not feel the need to travel to see each other, their elementary school and their time capsule... but I was wrong. The connection and the flurry of excitement each time another classmate was located bolstered their apparent need to see this project to its conclusion.

### **Culminating Experience**

The time capsule was buried in May of their last year of elementary school. The activity itself caused them to think about time and its implications for them. As they assembled the contents of the capsule they began to speculate where they might be and what they might be doing at the chosen time to reunite. Rhonda remembered thinking “what in the world am I going

to look like or be like in twenty years when I dig this up? I was interested mostly in whether or not I would be married or have children and what I would look like fascinated me.”

Trevette added “At that age...having that exercise...we were thinking about what we and other people were going to be like in twenty years... I think on a bigger level. We were in seventh grade and thinking about next year is almost inconceivable, so thinking about twenty years from now is a lifetime. We were wondering what we would think of this Michael Jackson album or this videocassette [tape]?”

Stephen believed this activity “held a lot of importance in [his] memory because it was a culminating experience at this school. The seventh grade was the culminating year and this project was the culminating project of that year academically. I mean there were plays and performances but this was the last, as I remember, the last big academic activity for that class.” As these learners thought more about time, they recognized that this project would become the capstone of their elementary experience. They believed in what they were doing and they thought it would have significance to them later because they all planned to return to it in what was then, almost two lifetimes away.

As they considered this as their last big academic project at the elementary school they assigned a special meaning to this, more than just the science fair project from September or the Spring performance of *Sleeping Beauty*. The very nature of a time capsule required them to think about time including the past, present and future. This learning exercise would be regarded as a launching pad for the adventures that would come in Jr. high, high school and beyond.

### **Sentimental Journey**

As emotional beings, we almost all appreciate sentiment, especially as it is assigned to childhood relics, traditions, and experiences. Even someone with bad memories of a previous

time in life can usually carve out something special to remember fondly. Sentiment itself is almost like a time capsule. We assign meaning to memories and seeing or touching that relic can conjure up a good memory of a previous time. Sentiment is supposed to be a sweet memory, as we don't tend to keep or treasure relics that are reminders of painful memories. This childhood experience was no different. Even at a young age, these learners had distinct ideas about what they would one day associate with their childhoods.

While they all contributed to the written content of the capsule, they specifically remembered the relics they contributed to the cache. Rhonda admitted contributing the Michael Jackson forty-five record to the capsule. "In fact, it was to that record that I performed a dance routine at the school talent show." For her, it offered dual representations. Not only did she contribute that record as a relic that represented the significance of the performer Michael Jackson, she also remembers using that record for a dance routine in a school performance. Dan said, "I put that pair of Nike shoes in there...I am sure they were worn out...or stunk." For him, the memory included that they were not parting with expensive or cherished items in their wardrobe. He probably had outgrown them so he offered them as a fashion trend artifact. Dan verified that the Izod® sock was included as opposed to a shirt because socks bearing the same little alligator were far less expensive than a golf shirt. As the participants and others viewed the relics, they often smiled and made an immediate connection to that artifact reminiscing that they too had indulged in the fashion trend or entertainment inclination.

In addition to the representations contained in the cultural cache they assembled, these participants fondly recalled other rich experiences from their elementary years. Trevette recalled overcoming her fear of performing in front of a crowd because she played Meriwether the Fairy in the school play and played the hand bells in a Christmas program. She credits these early

experiences to being able to get up in front of a group today and speak even though she is nervous. She also commented on Rhonda's observation to the students during the ceremony when she discussed remembering winning the three-legged race on field day. "I think Rhonda talking about the three-legged race was a perfect example of how important it is to work together. I mean, you can't do the three legged race unless your partner is equally committed...and doing it just as hard as you are," Trevette commented as she validated some of the non-academic lessons she learned at Springdale. Trevette also recalled with great nostalgia the relationship she had with Lee Ann. "Our paths were completely different, you know, she was from the north, and we were in this school together. We were in this program together and she was my best friend and those two people would never have come together if it had not been for this school and I mean, even still we talk about [this]. It's invaluable!"

Stephen was one who fondly recalled academic skills. "I remember a small unit on friendly letter writing and the proper way to fold a friendly letter...proper way to put it in an envelope. I still remember how to do that. I remember work on fractions. You know, these kinds of skill lessons are not dynamic or anything like that but they are the building blocks that everything stands upon later when you go off to...high school. I remember coming to this library with good friends. We knew where our favorite books were here. There was a small collection of World War II atlas books and catalogs of weapons of World War II. I remember going through a period of that in fifth and sixth grade. I remember in third grade using the IMS math system [Individual Math Systems], which was a self-contained cart with hanging files, color-coded for difficulty with practice cards that were laminated. You wrote on them with a grease pencil and you would erase it with a sock. I guess I remember that for a couple of reasons. I remember because it allowed me to kind of move at my own pace. I remember being frustrated a little bit

because I was not at the same pace as the guy who was furthest along in the class...so it motivated me.” Aside from Dan’s recollection of a string of verb conjugations that he can rapidly recite to this day, Stephen clearly recalled the greatest number of academic lessons. He holds a strong value for the lessons that were building blocks for more complex lessons. I have pondered whether that attributed in any way to the fact that of the six, he is the only one who became a teacher.

Lee Ann, the one for whom the arts played a significant role in her development, recalled a love of reading that was developed in elementary school. “The love of reading struck me around age 12. Before that I just read when I had to and suddenly it was one book that got me hooked; *Jane Eyre*.” She added *Penrod* by Booth Tarkington as another book that was a catalyst for developing her love for reading. She recalled how much she learned about producing a play from Mrs. Grenga. She told about the skills of not only acting and singing but enunciating words, producing, costumes, sets, programs etc. Lee Ann clearly appreciated her exposure to the arts and described artistic expression as her true passion. Then Lee Ann added. “I think art is as important as reading.” As she reminisced about the value of reading, she added, “I think parents have a huge responsibility, as do teachers, but I believe it starts much earlier than formal education. You go into some people’s houses and they don’t have books around and I just can’t understand that at all. I think having books around is key, and being read to and seeing your parents read; that is really important.” As I listened to Lee Ann tell her story I could not help but see the pattern that she appreciated the foundation that reading provided in education as well as the value of her first love, which was the arts. She majored in art in college becoming a graphics designer but she has found that the art studio she opened for children to be the reward of her

talent and her education. She wants to pass her passion for arts to future generations by engaging children in the arts.

Bryan fondly remembered projects that fully engaged him. He could remember doing a science fair project where he made paper, though he did not remember what he was studying through that process. He recalled that one student made a product that produced a chemical reaction that fizzled and bubbled and boiled over, again rendering it interesting but not interesting enough to attach some objective to it. He claims to remember certain teachers teaching certain things and IMS math cards, though he failed to articulate specific skills. He recalled being rewarded with m&m's ® for correct answers in Mrs. Grenga's math class but does not remember specific skills she taught.

Very clear in Bryan's memory was his experience of being grade-skipped. He had a close relationship with a few young friends and recalls being at the advanced reading table with them since kindergarten. They had attempted to move him to a higher grade level one class at a time but he disappeared to the gym every day at the same time. Finally in fourth grade the teachers decided to just move him up an entire grade level. Bryan didn't know whether his parents were consulted or not but he admitted that they always agreed with the teachers anyway. He recalls the deafening silence and the look of loss on his friend's face when he picked up his books and went to the adjoining class. Even though he made friends and eventually recovered, he admits that the grade-skipping episode marked not only him but his best friend as well. "I would not do that again," he explained. "And in the big picture, rushing me a year didn't gain me anything.

Dan, a self-described social animal recalls rich experiences that contributed to his being. He recalled performances and playing on the playground as acutely as he remembered the facts about the 1980's during the quiz bowl competition. I find it interesting that it was his memory for

details and people that actually facilitated the locating of the buried treasure. He was completely capable of a rapid-fire rendition of the conjugation of the verb IS that he memorized in fourth grade but when confronted with the question about his memories about elementary school, he turned to experiences. In talking with Dan, I learned that he was a passionate pragmatic. He knew what had to be done and he just made it happen. Dan is the benefactor who donated the chemical drum and plastic vault that contained my students' relics for the new capsule. As I questioned why he would invest that much money in a school out of his home state for children he had never met, he pointed to returning the favor to the place that had invested in him. "We could have wasted two months trying to nickel and dime people for ten bucks when that would have taken us out of the game. When there are no options, there are no decisions. There was no option. [You] had to have this thing."

Rhonda did not recall academic lessons either. She pointed to interactions with teachers and peers, memorable performances and field day. She approached her elementary experience holistically. As she addressed the students, she recalled having to work together to win the three-legged race at field day and having to step outside of her comfort zone and challenge herself to perform even when there was a possibility of failure. She believed that it was those lessons in the secure environment of Springdale that gave her the ambition to pursue her dream of becoming a University of Georgia cheerleader. She articulated the work ethic and practice and drive that was necessary to reach an athletic goal and credited the experiences she enjoyed at Springdale as facilitating those. As I questioned her about specific lessons that she recalled, she again turned to climate of the learning environment of Springdale. She recalled having control over her own learning and felt very entitled as the oldest class in the building. In her memory, Springdale valued and trusted the older students and allowed them to have "the run of the school". Rhonda

was clearly an emotional being as she related how much she desired to please her teachers and her friends. Even though it often pushed her beyond her level of comfort to take athletic or academic risks, she credits being in a safe environment for risk taking as being key to her success.

### **Connections to Teachers**

Another theme that presented itself prominently was a close emotional connection to the teachers. All of the students mentioned the seventh grade math teacher, Mrs. Grenga, as being a defining figure in their education. They were thrilled to reunite with her at the celebration as they shared honored memories of her teaching them not only math but drama, music, and confidence to perform in front of a group. She attended the celebration and brought each of them a half-pound bag of m&m's® as a sweet token reminiscent of their seventh grade math class. Dan, whose sharp memory of his elementary experience produced the names of many of the teachers he had, considered Mrs. Grenga to be the pinnacle of his academic experience at Springdale. He remembered that she was as musical as she was mathematical and was usually in charge of the performances by playing the piano or singing or directing the play. He recalled her high expectations of every learner as being key to the success that they shared at Springdale.

For Trevette, Mrs. Grenga was not only her teacher but also her mother. Citing her own bias, she said, "Jo Bess Grenga was the best teacher I ever had." Trevette recalled that her mother was a no-nonsense teacher if students were fooling around but she was also very dramatic and playful in the way she delivered math lessons as well. Trevette added, "I know I am lucky to have had my mom as a real teacher and a mama teacher so I am very unique that way. I am lucky." Lee Ann remembered this teacher more for what she taught her as a producer than as



a math teacher. She recalled being taught how to put emphasis on certain words, how to sing and how to act. “She knew everything about it!”

I was surprised that in addition to Mrs. Grenga, the students could recall so many of their teachers, both ones who were able to attend the celebration and ones I had never heard of before. As they sat around the tables in the media center and reminisced with each other, you could see their faces light up each time someone recalled a teacher or subject for whom they had fond memories. These participants considered the teachers with whom they made an emotional connection to be the ones that taught them the most. The ones who reunited with former teachers at the celebration were interested in thanking the teachers and letting them know that they had turned out alright. Dan, who acknowledged a penchant for mischief, did not want to be remembered by his teachers as such. He shared with them his personal and professional success as he told them that he appreciated what they had invested in him.

As I discussed the impact of teachers with Rhonda, she related a story from her preschool experience that she remembers to this day which she credits for setting the tone for her lifetime of learning. When she was in preschool she did not know it wasn't appropriate to color on her report card. Her brother informed her that she was going to be in big trouble for that. Her mother had to walk her in to class the next day to explain it to her teacher. The teacher responded as if the coloring had made the report card more beautiful. Rhonda has a very clear memory of this pivotal event and credits that teacher for the way she loved and respected teachers throughout her academic career. Rhonda also related a story about how a college professor of business calculus cared so much about her that he was able to teach her some skills she never thought she would be able to master. She did not want to be a victim of the “weeding out” that this class had the reputation for being. If she was going to get admitted to the advanced marketing classes, she had

to pass this class. This professor “cared about me so much and saw that I was working so hard he was able to give me the additional tutoring I needed which made me respond accordingly.”

Rhonda insisted that the emotional connection she had with her teachers was key to her performance throughout her years of schooling.

### **Reframing the Experience as Adults**

As the participants reminisced about their school experience and the time capsule, they admitted that they had reframed the experience with an adult perspective and now recognize the value of that learning experience so much more than they could have when they were assembling it. They acknowledged a chest-thumping pride in the work they were doing as twelve year olds as if it had real archaeological significance, but they really did not have a frame of reference for the meaning that it would for them at the time they reunited with it.

Lee Ann acknowledged that as important as they thought their work was, they really did not fully understand it back then. “I only understood it when I was contacted for this [event]. I realized that it was not just what we did thirty years ago...it was a thirty-year history project. And that’s only becoming clear to me now as I have an adult perspective to apply.” She never really forgot about the time capsule and had shared with others throughout the past few decades that she had participated in a time capsule but “NOW, it has made me do a lot of thinking about what was going on then...what is going on now...how people have changed...how the culture has changed...and how we view learning again. So it has been a huge history lesson and not just history history, but school history and social history because you look at these people...these friends of mine...so it wasn’t just about the time capsule, it was a social part of it.”

Bryan asserted, “I think we knew that we were going to be collecting things that were signs of the times...what we do, how we live and what was important to us. I don’t think any of

us could have had any clue as to how those things could have changed. We knew the concept of things that would be useful later but I don't think we had any idea how significant this would be to your students." Bryan noted that a learning activity in which he participated as a child could be meaningful to others but he suggested that it continued to be significant to him. "That day of the celebration is one I will remember forever. That is just something that doesn't happen more than once in a lifetime and not at all in most people's lifetimes." These statements substantiate a notion that an adult perspective of something they consider important is often much deeper and more complex than the way a child views what is important.

Stephen, the participant who viewed the entire experience with a philosophical bent reiterated, "I am glad, of course, that this capsule had significance for people other than us but the compelling interest continues to be reconnecting with a time in our lives that was special to us. I don't know if ironic is the word...that a banal object like a trash can would have been the vehicle to reconnect with people...important people with whom I had not had any contact in twenty-nine years. It's just remarkable. You know, it wasn't the Internet...it wasn't *facebook*...it was any of those things. It was a trashcan in the ground with our names painted on the side of it." This obviously continued to roll around in his mind until the next day because during his flight back home to California, he penned a letter to the editor of the Macon Telegraph about the experience that began as a child but was appreciated through the lens of an adult perspective. He titled his letter, *If I Could Keep Time in a Trashcan*. In his letter he questioned why his interest in that capsule that he left behind decades earlier was significant. "I have concluded that the physical contents of the capsule, a standard galvanized trash can, are not nearly as important as the memories I carry from that spring twenty-nine years ago. In retrospect, I realize now that the spring of seventh grade marked the end of childhood. It was the end of blind trust and established

certainties.” Stephen goes on to mention that the community broke trust because everyone scattered to various private schools in the area and the security he had known in a diverse, yet tightly knit community of learners, disintegrated. He longed to have back that group he had grown so close to as a child.

Trevette, whose mother was one of the teachers the participants revered so passionately and one who appreciated experiences over content, offered this adult perspective. “I didn’t notice it then but over time I have recognized that [this time capsule experience] helped me as a seventh grader start to think about twenty years from now being an actual real time in my life. I think part of the reason for doing this is to get kids to think about the future.” Trevette believes that the experiences she recalls prepared her more for her career in medical sales than any content lessons. “I will tell you that ninety-five percent of what I do in my job today is about relating to other people and making them feel comfortable around me and being able to communicate what I need to communicate about it. I mean the product that I sell is so secondary, tertiary to that. Being comfortable getting up and talking in front of a crowd...If I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t do my job.”

Dan, the self-described social animal who valued experiences but had a tremendous memory for academic details added, “the real magic of this [project] is the overlapping of the generations here. We are a glimpse into the future for them.” Obviously a science fiction enthusiast he made references to Star Trek and colliding universes and the value of generational representations of time. Springdale was, and still is, a highly performing community school. The administrators, teachers, students and physical facility have changed, but not the expectations of excellence and the nurturing and safe environment. These students did not recognize it at the time, because they did not have much to compare their elementary experience to, but now that

they view this experience through a broader, more worldly adult perspective, they recall their elementary experience fondly.

Rhonda, the self-described people pleaser who recalls the critical role of emotional connection played in her education continued to value emotional sentiment as she took one of her children out of school and allowed her to attend the celebration. “I am so glad I took my daughter out of school and let her miss a day of second grade because she was impacted by the whole experience too. She liked seeing all the children here and [it was important] that she saw her mama give a speech in front of all those people.” She recalled how reconnecting with people and things from an earlier time in her life conjured up warm memories of challenge, struggle and triumph. Those are attributes she values for her own daughters and ones she attributes developing in her own life to Springdale.

As each participant recounted the same experience, they all assigned it different meaning. It is evident they all appreciated the fact that we found their capsule, looked for them and ultimately invited them to a memorable celebration of generations of Springdale learners. As each one shared the experience through an adult perspective, I could really understand how one learning experience impacts each learner so differently, no matter how homogenous the group.

## CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY

The six participants in this study attended the same elementary school in Macon, Georgia from 1974-1980. Dan, Trevette, Bryan, Lee Ann, Stephen and Rhonda were all identified as academically gifted and during the spring of their last year in elementary school buried a culturally rich time capsule on the school grounds behind the lunchroom. They were tasked with capturing the important events and cultural representations of the time and compiling a capsule that would hold the artifacts until a chosen future date. A galvanized thirty-gallon trashcan painted blue was the vessel they chose to contain their artifacts. As the earth swallowed up their school project, they promised each other that they would reconvene in the year 2000 and celebrate the way the world would surely have changed. For them, the chosen time was almost two lifetimes away and they were more consumed with what they would look like and be like when they saw their buried treasure again. Twenty years came and went while their capsule held its ground. The ambitious elementary students grew up, pursued higher educations, began careers, started families and settled in various places around the country. In 2009, a group of students at the same elementary school became interested in the rumored buried treasure and began to look for it. When they failed to locate the buried treasure, they turned to *facebook* to try to find someone who knew of its precise location. The social networking outlet proved beneficial in locating students from 1980 and ultimately Dan; the participant whose sharp memory for details facilitated the precise location of not only the capsule but the other five participants as well. My students and I unearthed the buried treasure and despite the wet and muddy condition of the artifacts, were able to learn a tremendous amount about what elements of the culture were important in the eyes of elementary gifted learners, how life has changed since the capsule was

buried and how it has stayed the same. They compared and contrasted the changes in the school, our community, prices, entertainment icons, fashion trends, technological advancements, politics and news events. When the current Springdale students decided to bury another time capsule, they thought it appropriate to invite and celebrate the former students who were responsible for the many lessons facilitated by the 1980 time capsule. All six students who were pictured in the Macon Telegraph ceremoniously interring a trashcan full of cultural representations were invited and accepted our invitation to come home and celebrate as the project they initiated was completed. All six students graciously accepted the invitation not only to attend a reunion and new capsule interment but they also agreed to participate in this research project. The participants were encouraged to reflect on the experience of compiling the cultural cache and evaluate the experience both academically and socially. The participants were interviewed and asked to situate this learning experience in the context of their own development and substantiate why this particular experience was meaningful enough that almost thirty years later they would set aside personal and professional obligations to make the time to travel back to their academic roots to see this project to its conclusion. What ultimately became a homecoming for the participants also became an opportunity for tremendous learning for my students and as well as a research opportunity for me. The information gleaned from the interviews helped shape my own pedagogy and influenced the way I will approach teaching and learning going forward.

In this chapter, I will explore six findings that emerged from my dissertation research: (1) Lived experience contributes tremendously to meaningful learning and purposeful living; (2) Popular culture nurtures joy of learning that promotes liberative and active learning; (3) Emotional connections between teachers, students, and the learning content facilitate liberative learning; (4) Nostalgia masks privileges, inequalities, and prejudices that continue to plague

public schools; (5) Standardization and test driven curriculum attempt to quantify aesthetic and liberative aspects of learning, imprison the mind, conform critical thinking, sabotage imagination, and deprive possibilities for all children to learn in meaningful ways; and (6) There is a need for cultivating a landscape of learning that engenders “active learners, engaging learning content, inquiry oriented learning strategies, culturally inspiring learning environment, culturally responsible policy making, creating learning evaluation and assessment, caring and challenging teachers” (He et al, 2010, p.100) where learners, teachers, educators, parents, community workers administrators, and policy makers work together to inspire all learners to reach “their highest potential”(Siddle-Walker, 1996).

This research grew out of my own desire to situate purposeful learning within meaningful experiences as opposed to skill mastery that is so prevalent in classrooms today. Upon recalling their elementary experiences, the participants substantiated that lived experiences contributed tremendously to meaningful learning and purposeful living (**Finding 1**). The most significant and probably the most expected finding in this research was that experience is the best teacher. This discovery was nothing short of cliché, having not been a realization I have come to know as a teacher but as a mantra repeated throughout my life. A little experience is often more valuable than a lot of training which is why, historically, apprenticeships have been the predominant method of learning a skill. For centuries, humans have associated experience with great value over training and even today, most employment opportunities are available to the experienced over the highly trained. Colleges recognize the need for experience in applying the training so they often require internships as an integral part of their requirements. Years of classroom training, practice with mathematical formulas, and solving hypothetical problems pales in comparison to intense, interactive immersion in the actual setting where those formulas and



problem solving skills can be employed. Teacher education candidates are required to do a practicum student-teaching experience as a fundamental requirement of education training programs because of the value that close engagement with an actual classroom, school, students, parent and teachers will provide.

Experience and learning are so intertwined that it is difficult to view them separately. Beard and Wilson (2006) posit that experiential learning is the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment. (p.19). Methodologically, learning is built by relating one experience to another. For this reason teachers are constantly trying to tie a new concept to an existing experience in the students' frames of reference. Dewey (1938/1998) cautions us that experience and education are not necessarily synonymous. If the experiences are disjointed or unconnected to another experience, the experience is at least uneducative and at most could distort future growth. "The challenge for teachers who are building an education based on experience is to create opportunities to grow and develop into further experiences, and eventually [the learners can] take control of their own learning" (Ayers, 2001, p.131). Once a learner successfully assimilates new content into an existing framework, the scaffolding grows, enabling more and more content and experiences to be added. Paulo Freire (1970/1993) maintains that "knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 46). This experience---this constant impatient wrestling of the learner with the world as she attempts to make sense of her environment is precisely where the learning actually happens.

When I reflect on the notion of this constant, restless, impatient wrestling with the world in order to learn and grow and live meaningfully, I am reminded of how often and easily we

default to our “comfort zone” as a place we wish to inhabit. After twenty-two years in various elementary schools that represented diverse, however privileged student populations, I was abruptly transferred again this year. I am still the same teacher but I cannot perform in the same way because my students are dramatically different. My most recent assignment was an economically privileged suburban elementary school with enough identified gifted learners to support two full time teachers. I am now serving urban, impoverished students representing eight different low-income neighborhood schools. My more affluent students live in housing projects while some of the dwellings that my students call home are condemnable. Several of the gifted students I serve are listed as homeless on their enrollment documents. A percentage of my students regularly relate that they have no electricity or water in their homes and I provide not only paper and pencils, but for some, uniforms, shoes and food. The resources I have available to me in this new assignment are pathetic. I used to have a Smartboard and projection screen and I now have a 1993 computer with a floppy disk drive and a marginal antiquated presentation television. To say that this is a dramatic turn from the environment that I inhabited for more than two decades is an understatement. While I was not thrilled about moving out of my comfortable, familiar place, I reported to my new assignment depending on the philosophy that they are all academically gifted children and I would continue to enjoy the same methods for enriching their learning experiences. I was wrong. Dramatic change in the student population requires dramatic changes in my practice.

Since the first day I met my students I have been experiencing this restless, impatient, wrestling with my unfamiliar environment. I must take care of their physical needs as soon as they step off the bus. I am now focused on the influences of the culture in which they are immersed. These students are intimately familiar with the high crime rates, gang violence and

drug activity that plague their neighborhoods. The culture in which they are immersed is foreign to me and my exposure to the reality that is their everyday existence is an avenue for my own awakening. I am not more or less successful in the implementation of my job as it is currently defined. In a short time I have grown tremendously as my eyes have been opened and I have been enlightened by my experience; an opportunity that would have escaped me if I had been given the choice of relocation. Given the option, I likely would have elected to stay in my comfortable, familiar placement, thereby eliminating the enlightenment that has been afforded me by the students I now serve. This is not to suggest that one placement is preferred over another. I can navigate both worlds but only the one that is so different from my own situates me for the “wide awakesness” (Greene, 1978) that facilitated the learning I am currently experiencing.

I now understand that learning does not necessarily have to happen in the moment where the experience takes place. Often with active problem solving, the learner must look back on unsuccessful attempts at solving a problem in order to make the necessary modifications to experience success. Beard and Wilson (2007) refer to this as “retrospective learning” (p.37).

Often when we are undergoing an experience there is insufficient time and/or we are too close, physically, chronologically or emotionally-to have the ability to make sense of what is happening. These processes of thinking about a past event may be illustrated when we say, ‘If only I had...’ What we are doing is reflecting about the experience and making sense of it in our own mind- in effect we are attempting to fit the experience into our mental schema. (p.37)

This engaged thinking process is critical to the experience, especially when the experience fails to satisfy the inquiry on its own. As active learners, we often rewind conversations or events in

our mind to try to figure out what caused a person to respond a particular way or what events precipitated another. This interplay between thinking and experience is critical to understanding how we learn about the way we are situated in the world.

I believe these participants experienced a measure of retrospective learning by participating in this inquiry. They were asked to apply an adult perspective to a learning activity in which they had participated decades earlier. This required them to view the same events through a new lens and draw conclusions on its value today as if it could be applied to their own children's learning. Stephen described his thinking on the importance another generation placed on their project. He articulated that he never could have imagined the larger interest in their capsule beyond the few students who assembled it. He was delighted that generations of students, including his nephew were the beneficiaries of the learning that had begun when he was a student inhabiting the same classrooms. Further, he philosophically described the value that he now holds for the project because he has reflected on the significance that the time period held in his development. "You know for me, coming back has been a journey of re-self discovery. The end of seventh grade here represented the end of childhood. And then Jr. High School was a new chapter in our lives and because of the notion of childhood, it's got kind of a rosy glow to it but also a lot escapes from us after we leave this environment ...."

In *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, Maxine Green (2001) reminds us that "self-reflection and critical consideration can be as liberating as they are educative" (p.22). Stephen clearly viewed this experience as an adult on a philosophical level. To him it represented an opportunity to reclaim the moment that he considered the end of his childhood more than an academic experience. As he had traveled from California to attend the event, he probably had to justify his time and financial expense in a stronger capacity than just a homecoming opportunity. For as

much as he claims to have gained from the experience as a young learner, clearly the reflection that he enjoyed as an adult facilitated this as a deeply aesthetic experience.

Trevette recalled how she now views some of the experiences she had in elementary school as an adult that she did not fully understand as a child, especially experiences that caused her to step outside her comfort zone. She recalled performing in school plays and playing the hand bells before an audience and credits those opportunities with developing her confidence. “I can get in front of a group today because I was exposed to it at an early age” she suggested, crediting her teachers and her mother (who was the seventh grade teachers that all of the participants recalled so fondly) for encouraging them to overcome their fear of performing before an audience.

Lee Ann revered the drama opportunities even more than the other students because she was the student for whom the arts played such a significant role. She not only appreciated the opportunity to perform but also the many skills she learned about producing a play as well. When asked what part of the play was most significant, she said, “ It was witnessing what it takes to put on a production. And Mrs. Grenga was a producer. I mean she knew everything about it. She taught us how to sing, how to act... I remember witnessing her tell Rhonda how to put emphasis on certain words...anything I know about drama was really from putting on that play.” As we discussed the value that the arts provide for some learners, Lee Ann quickly added, “I think art is as important as reading.” As I engaged her regarding that profound statement, she described the arts as an emotional experience. For her, participating in a school play was not about memorizing the lines and entertaining an audience. It was about discovering who she was and how her passion could be valued and appreciated as much as reading. Fortunately for her, she excelled at both.

I found Lee Ann's statements regarding the value of the school play to be profound. In education today we are so consumed with the content that is deemed important by the test that we don't even consider the value that artistic expression might have for some learners. In fact, an economic downturn like we are currently experiencing often lands the arts on the chopping block, relegated as non-essential and extra-curricular. Lee Ann was academically gifted but her strong inclination was for artistic expression. She employed art in her writing. She appreciated art in literature. She identified art as significant to her being. In the end it was not her academic aptitude that facilitated her career, but the arts. This leads me to question how many activities we consider extra-curricular (read "unimportant" by today's classroom standards) when they may represent the very subject a student is best at achieving, the passion within a learner that has been untapped or the single element that keeps a learner coming back to school.

This research has significant implications for my own pedagogy. As an educator I have to ask myself, if experience is the best teacher, why don't we make experiences do the work for us? As for my pedagogy, I believe I need for children to make problem solving an experience, rather than a correct answer on a logic exercise. I need children to experience historical re-enactments rather study dates and places to fill in blanks on a test. I need to make the electoral process meaningful for students by creating an election for something significant for the students such as electing a school pet rather than distributing a study guide and testing them on the facts. With the same amount of effort and expertise, I can plan experiences instead of planning lessons. More than anything I am reminded that I cannot separate the learning from the world in which it is to be used.

Because these students were naturally motivated to indulge their interest in popular culture for a school related project, this inquiry substantiated that popular culture nurtured joy of

learning that promotes liberative and active learning (**Finding 2**). As the participants recalled the details of compiling the time capsule, they remembered a particular interest in writing about popular culture because it was so different from any other project they had ever been assigned. They recalled a delicious thrill of gathering and compiling this cultural information as if the teacher had somehow lost her way and was allowing them to look at fashion magazines and listen to Michael Jackson by mistake. After writing about fashion trends, sports cars and cutting edge electronics, they brainstormed about other cultural representations they should include such as political conflict, prices, changing technology, and world events. Even though nearly thirty years had transpired since they had seen the contents of their capsule, each one could remember their written and physical contributions to the project.

It was the self-direction and the freedom to include whatever they thought was important that precipitated the emotional connection these students had with this project. They divided the work among themselves based on which one had a penchant for that particular topic and then discussed it with the group before adding it to the cache. They were not given an outline or any blanks to fill in. They were told to document what the world was like in 1980. They assumed a role of significance, as if years from now archaeologists were going to find this capsule and learn something that was the final piece in a world-knowledge puzzle. They were so convinced of its significance (and their own) that they found it applicable to include the itinerary for their class trip and the playbill from the seventh grade play within its contents. This assignment represented freedom, self-direction, and efficacy. They were so connected to this work that it did not seem like work at all. They would have done it anyway. They were in “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.3).

For years teachers have attempted to keep popular culture outside the classroom door, believing it to be a distraction to the learning process. Only recently have educators begun to recognize the significance the learner's natural interest in popular culture has to academia and have begun to exploit that relationship for academic connections. If we want to effect change, educators must "forge an intimate relationship with popular culture" (Daspit, 2000, p. 165). Popular culture provides substance for the formation of identity and the students' understanding of their places within the culture. Failing to validate any part of the culture or heritage is to sacrifice an avenue for teaching.

The popular culture that was recorded by these students was reflective of their white, middle class, privileged identities. There was nothing within the pages of narrative that alluded to racial tension in this town, or even in this country. There were no news clippings about gang violence or the War on Drugs that was certainly newsworthy at the time the capsule was compiled. The students did not explore poverty, housing projects or crime. Their white-washed view of the world was recorded in a way that reflected that everyone occupied similar spaces or at the very least, this was the norm. Michael Jackson, the entertainer they featured so prominently transcended racial constructs; he was "like white". There were no rhythm and blues singers, no rap artists, no black actors represented in the capsule that was supposed to represent the culture. Bill Cosby, Redd Foxx and Gary Coleman were all prominent black actors during that time but none of them were featured in the *Entertainment* section of their culture book. The boom box, also referred to as a "ghetto blaster" that was as prominent an electronic fixture as an iPod is today was not even mentioned, even though a Michael Jackson cassette tape was included. The clothing style that was recorded in the pages of the book was "preppy" and was modeled by white supermodels. Equally as disconcerting, there were no notable women



included among the featured trendsetting Americans that were not objectified by being aligned with fashion or entertainment. Even though the participants did explore their own definition of popular culture, they failed to venture outside of what they understood their narrow cultural representations to be. Still, every relic that was included was significant to forming their identities within the community and within the culture.

In the interviews with participants a number of themes were presented related to the emotional connection students made with teachers, students and the content in a way that promotes liberative learning (**Finding 3**). As the participants recounted events that stand out in their memories, they were usually described passionately. Rhonda described desperately wanting to please her parents and the significant adults in her life. She recalled one of her earliest memories in preschool that she believed set the tone for her approach to learning. “I remember [my teacher’s] nurturing, sweet, precious way of encouraging us.” Rhonda shared a vivid memory of being four years old and coloring her report card with red and purple crayons. Her older brother caught her coloring on that sacred document and told her mother. He then proceeded to tell his sister just how much trouble she was going to get in with her teacher the next day because of her inappropriate artistic expression. “So my mother walked me in with tears in my eyes and [Mrs. Pickett] just grabbed it out of my mother’s hand and said that I had made it more beautiful. I think I responded to teachers who were quite nurturing because I was such a pleaser. I wanted to do well. I wanted to make good grades, I wanted to do what was right so the teachers who were really good at encouraging that are the ones I remember the most.”

Trevette obviously had an emotional connection with teachers. Her parents and grandparents were all teachers, administrators or professors and her mother was her classroom teacher in seventh grade. Education was important in her home and she always knew the

expectation to perform well, whether it was comfortable for her or not. Trevette offered. “I have to be a little bit biased here because my mom....Jo Bess Grenga was the best teacher I ever had. She would run around the room dramatically, she would sing some of our lessons to us...those are the things I remember.”

Rhonda, the one for whom the emotional connection to teachers was so significant continued to recount various teachers along her educational journey who invested in her through an emotional connection as much as academically. She offered, “for me absolutely the emotional connection was key. It is like that old saying...’they don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care’.” Rhonda described one professor who was pivotal in her academic journey as a Cherokee Indian who was actually raised on a reservation. Dr. Running Wolf “cared about what he did so much that he was able to teach me business calculus. He cared about me so much and saw that I was working so hard he was able to give me the additional tutoring that I needed which made me respond accordingly. Rhonda admitted that she did not like math and she detested calculus. As this course was a gateway into the upper level marketing courses, she knew she had no option but to pass it. She believes that this professor was compassionate toward students who demonstrated a desire to do well and credited the relationship she had with Dr. Running Wolf for “making” her learn a level of math she did not have confidence that she could do.

As Rhonda and Trevette described the emotionally connections they shared with various teachers beginning as early as preschool, I recognized that I did not share their experiences. While I can vaguely remember teachers’ faces and associate it with a certain grade level, I did not emotionally connect with any teachers I had from first grade through high school. Perhaps it was because I never was a teacher pleaser. My lackluster grades, my fidgety conduct, and my

overall inattentiveness failed to qualify me to be embraced by any teacher, activity leader or choir director. As a child, I wanted to please adults but I never recall a single instance where I did (other than my parents, who I figured were obligated to find redeeming qualities in my character).

I do remember clearly being expelled from the church's Cherub Choir when I was six years old but it was not because I couldn't sing or play the triangle. As I recall, on a late Wednesday afternoon, I was fed sugar cookies and apple juice and then asked to stand very still on the steps at the altar to practice our performance for the upcoming Sunday. My inability to comply with the angelic image that would surely redeem our performance skills resulted in the choir director asking my mother not to get a robe and huge bow for me from the choir room because I would not be able to stand still long enough to perform on Sunday and that might ruin the worship experience. My mother looked at me with disappointment. She didn't chastise me but she certainly didn't advocate for me either. She seemed rather resigned to the fact that I was "a bit rambunctious" and just apologetically made some comment about me being her "jumping bean" as she took me by the hand and we went home.

I don't remember caring about a teacher and I certainly didn't believe that a teacher cared anything about me. In fact, the notion that teachers were even supposed to care about students was completely foreign to me. When teachers wrote comments on my report card about my not listening or paying attention or my impulsiveness, I never believed that she was trying to help me improve. Rather, I concluded that she was trying to substantiate why she was not able to make a better student out of me. I was not wildly disruptive to the class or impudent toward authority; instances that would have caused me to be constantly disciplined. I never had to stay after school. I never stood on the wall at recess. I never had an office referral. I was simply invisible,

absent, uninspired. Could this failure for me to emotionally connect with any teacher at any grade level be the reason that I cannot recall a single teacher who thought I was “college material”? What teacher in the whole world would not encourage a student who wanted to go to college? Every one of mine.

From first through twelfth grade, my academic performance was considered marginal at best. I never repeated a grade but I certainly never made the Honor Roll either. I squeaked by from grade to grade, “encouraged” by comments like “you could make better grades if you just applied yourself” and “I taught it. It’s up to you to catch on.” So, as teachers were concerned, I didn’t care about them and they didn’t care about me.

I once told my daddy that I made an F on my report card because that teacher in particular didn’t like me. He asked me if she liked anyone in the class. When I told him that she sure did, he suggested that I figure out what it is they were doing, and do it. I was the fifth of six children so my parents were well beyond panicking about how I might turn out. They did not make excuses for me and they told me that they would be proud of me no matter what I achieved (which is where I got the idea that they were obligated to be proud of me. Who could be proud of someone who doesn’t do well?). I did have the notion that some teachers really believed in some students because I had siblings who were better performers than I was. I figured that for teachers to really like a student they had to make good grades, sit still and not talk and I was never going to qualify. I knew teachers who encouraged my sisters to apply to colleges and even wrote letters of recommendation for them. Not only did no teacher believe I would be successful in college, one even discouraged my mother from allowing me apply for a student loan exercising some kind of compassion knowing that I would be unsuccessful and as a result be saddled with an expensive loan to repay. Based on my high school transcripts and my pathetic SAT scores, I was

accepted at an expensive private women's college on *academic probation*! During that first semester, I met a professor who, through working with me on a homecoming event discovered that I could think outside the box and create something out of nothing. She believed that my creativity would be worthwhile in a classroom and since she just happened to be recruiting for the education department, she became the first person in my academic career to believe that I was a worthwhile student. I have vivid memories of wanting to please that professor who was obviously confused about my academic capacity.

I was in college before I understood the pivotal role that a positive teacher held in my progress; a lesson that Rhonda learned in preschool. I was so motivated to continue having that professor believe that I was a worthwhile student that I worked harder than I ever had in my life. I still don't know if I was driven by my desire to please the one or the craving to disprove the many. That semester, I was removed from academic probation, and within three semesters, my name appeared on the Dean's List. I had four years to redeem a lifetime of poor academic performance. I did whatever it took to feed the confidence of my one professor who was pivotal in my academic journey. While my participants enjoyed the emotional connection much earlier in life than I did, I have to admit that I am grateful that my circumstances did not exclude me from the academic success that I eventually came to know, even if it was almost too late. While the end product of being a successfully contributing adult is the same, I have to wonder how my journey may have been altered had I experienced an emotional connection with teachers at a much earlier age.

My participants' strong connection with teachers and an absence of a connection with my own teachers substantiated the same thing; students perform well when they believe the teacher believes in them. When I was a student in school it was expected of the learner to take what the

teacher offered or be relegated to figuring it out on your own. As a teacher I recognize that I must initiate the connection and I must embrace the learner if I am going to be able to influence and teach her, regardless of how difficult that connection might be.

In addition to connecting on an emotional level with the student, engaging with the content is equally important. A major complaint from teachers about poor student performance is often related to apathy. Teachers believe that the students are hard to reach because they just don't care about history, or algebra, or English literature. When I hear such a complaint, I completely agree with them. "You're right. They don't." I believe that it is incumbent upon the teacher to "sell" their content to the learner in a way that makes them buy in. The problem with that philosophy is that too often, the skills and facts we are trying to drill are unrelated to any frame of reference the learner already possesses. I believe that we don't spend as much time hanging the content on the scaffolding that exists as we do measuring if the content was memorized in time for us to enter the prescribed number of grades into the grade book. If we as teachers will sacrifice some of the drill time to frontload the questioning and motivation, the experience will do the work for us.

As a teacher, I know that the students learn best when they are fully engaged or emotionally connected to the content. That was apparently the case with these students. They enjoyed the freedom of this creative assignment and while they were researching and recording popular culture, it differed from other reports they were required to do in class because they were exploring topics of their own choosing. As a teacher, I recognize that the overall objective was to demonstrate that they could access data, compose it in an acceptable format and record the elements of the time period to preserve for the future to see. At the elementary level, research is often the secondary objective. In 1980, if the teacher wanted a child to learn more about Susan B. Anthony or animals indigenous to Australian deserts, she assigned a research report. The student

then begrudgingly looked through encyclopedias or now, Internet resources, to find information to copy. Copying information that answers the question and ultimately satisfies this assignment becomes the objective. The student did not learn more about Susan B. Anthony than the teacher had already taught, nor did she learn how to conduct research. She learned how to satisfy the teacher's request. This is still as weak a teaching methodology today as it was then, but it continues to be assigned every day in classrooms. If the objective were to learn how to research the answers to questions, the students would learn so much more by beginning with the questions that they are pondering in their own minds.

The heightened level of engagement that these learners had with this activity coupled with the fact that the timing represented the end of an era for them contributed to the memory of this experience. When I talked with the participants about their memories of elementary learning experiences, they all recalled experiences rather than skills. Rhonda recalled working together with her partner to win the three-legged race, Stephen remembered going to the media center with his friends to check out history books, Lee Ann remembered learning how to produce the play and Trevette recalled overcoming her fear of performing before an audience when she played the hand bells in a Christmas program.

Bryan shared a memory that was significant not only to him but to his friends. Bryan was already reading when he arrived in kindergarten and teachers immediately began to move him ahead. His rapid progression situated him in a small group of about three boys who were grouped at the "advanced reading table" during their elementary years. From third to fourth grade, the teachers were considering grade skipping him so they sent him to one or two classes on a trial basis. As a third grader, Bryan did not care to leave his friends and participate in class with a different grade level so at the appropriate time each day, he reported to the gym and hung

out. He admits that it was months later when he was finally caught and sent back to his classroom and his friends. Bryan smiled as he recalled a streak of mischief that was developed when teachers lost track of him for a significant length of time. Then, suddenly serious, Bryan described the impact experienced when the next year, the teachers abruptly decided to move him on up. Without warning and to his knowledge, without even conferencing with his parents, he described the day that the teacher told him to get his books and report to the classroom next door. “I picked up my books and moved over to the fifth grade side.” He reported.

“My buddy that I mentioned, Greg Tapley, who I had been at the advanced reading table with since first grade... he remembers that day too...and it was like silence...and everybody was watching me get up and move in slow motion. He remembers those doors just slamming shut. And of course I remember those older kids looking intimidating to me but I think that experience had a tremendous impact on Greg as well as me.”

Bryan acknowledged that the teachers may have conferred with his parents but emphasized that his parents always agreed with teachers so he was basically a pawn. He didn't want to leave his buddies, recalling that it may have been harder on his friends than it was on him. “And in hindsight, that is something I wouldn't do again.” True to the nostalgia that framed this experience, he glossed over that incident by following with “I was happy as a kid...and made new friendships...and several friends from Springdale went on to high school with me and so forth but I would not do that again. In the big picture, rushing me a year ahead didn't gain me anything.”

Of all of the experiences that Bryan had during elementary school, he recalled the day he was abruptly grade skipped in the greatest detail. He had scant memories of science fair projects and even his contributions to the time capsule paled compared to his description of the event that



made him feel ripped away from the friends he had been with since kindergarten. As he looked back on the experiences that shaped his being, the day that he was moved to another classroom with older kids was more significant than any project that warranted a first place ribbon. This substantiates how many things that go on inside a school are even more significant to the learner than whether he can choose the correct answer on a test. Further, this is the only memory that was shared with me that even had a tinge of pain involved but he quickly glossed over it by crediting himself with making new friendships etc.

My perception of the memories shared by the participants is that they were all were framed in a nostalgic glow that disguised all circumstances at that time, at that school, and with each other as idealistic. Nostalgia masks privileges, inequalities, and prejudices that continue to plague public schools (**Finding 4**). Nostalgia is “an excessively sentimental yearning for an irrecoverable past place or condition” (Whitlock, 2007, p.25). Nostalgia becomes the burden of using your memory to reconstruct a picture of idealistic times and places, with the one doing the remembering often being situated in the context of sweet sentiment.

In considering the strong influence that nostalgia had on the way my participants remembered the events from childhood, I must acknowledge that nostalgia has power. “Nostalgia sells everything from ice cream to lemonade by tapping into the idea that not only time—the past as opposed to the present--- was less complicated, but also that place was less complicated” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 24). Appreciating a less complicated place and time is evident in historical narratives, ad campaigns, bumper stickers and country songs. We are cultured to remember “the good old days” with fondness. Nostalgia is also mysteriously intangible; extraordinarily influential but barely noticeable. Whitlock (2007) describes the elusiveness of nostalgia “like a

fog on a spring morning, heavy yet elusive, so it is increasingly difficult to extract the one from the other” (p.22).

The notion of nostalgia is elusive but its mysterious power can be dangerous. Svetlana Boym (2001) describes nostalgia as a “yearning for both place and time. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases, it can create a phantom homeland” (p.xvi). I am cognizant that when we are telling a romantic story of a previous time, especially a time as preciously revered as childhood, our bent toward nostalgia can jade our recollection. Do we really not remember painful details or are we just choosing to leave out the elements of the story that don’t fit nicely into the idealistic image we are portraying? Why are we so intent on portraying an image that is favorable over one that is realistic? I believe that in the case of these participants where all of them became successful, professional adults by most standards, they look back to their childhoods to claim a foundation that paved a way for the success they now enjoy. It becomes more acceptable for them to credit their early experiences with the success they now enjoy rather than having to explain how they navigated to a place of achievement despite the circumstances of their childhoods. Further, we tend to view childhood holistically as a single frame of time rather than a thousand little occurrences, both positive and negative.

Nostalgia is elusive and is often difficult to substantiate because it deals with representations rather than concrete elements. Whitlock (2007) envisions nostalgia “as a process rather than a product, one that can either feed melancholia or facilitate critical distance for re-visioning the past and place through its mobility of forward motion” (p.25). This process of looking back as a way of moving forward is what gives nostalgia credibility. As these participants were asked to look back at a time and space that contributed to their beings, they

longed for the simpler time, the happy, safe place...the good old days. Perhaps that is why similar themes presented in every interview.

Dan could articulate the nostalgic memories of the educational environment that was Springdale School. When asked what memories of Springdale were most memorable for him, he noted experiences, performances and playground interactions. School was the venue for his social development as much as for his academic building blocks. “We just had a great time at this school...There were very little discipline problems, it was a very relaxed atmosphere....And I think that whole flow of how everything went educated me...other than Mrs. Grenga, maybe one other teacher...there were really no peaks or valleys. It was always you know...just a good experience the whole time.”

Rhonda remembered nostalgically the way they were treated as seventh graders. Crediting Springdale for academic and personal freedom she believed that to some degree, she was encouraged to take charge of her own education. “We were really treated like high school seniors. We had complete run of the school...When we did a science project, we had free reign on ideas as to what we wanted to do...And then if we were working on a math lesson, like with Mrs. Grenga...we were so free to get up and move around and help each other learn. I just remember having that control.” This is a good example of how nostalgia taints a memory. I believe that these students, by virtue of being the oldest learners in the school and given a bit of freedom with assignments, interpreted that unusual luxury as “the run of the school.” I cannot fathom that a twelve-year-old student would have the type of freedom she describes remembering then or now. While they did have some freedom with this assignment while working on the time capsule, I believe they did not have much free reign when it came to assignments, assessments, movement around the building etc. It demonstrates that giving a

student a little freedom can be interpreted as much more powerful than it really is. Curriculum is scripted, lessons are scripted, daily schedules mandate what time each class will eat lunch and go to the restroom. Still, this learner remembered fondly a certain freedom in choosing what science fair project she wanted to do and it resonated with her as “complete run of the school.” Once again, this participant’s memories are not clouded by any painful occurrences.

Before complicating the notion that nostalgia has the capacity to cloud or distort memories, I typically viewed it with a rosy melancholy. I know that when I relate memories, especially to those in outer circles of friendship or acquaintance, I carefully select how I recall events, cognizant that judgments about me are being constantly negotiated. This sequence of looking back as a way of moving forward is a tightrope. We don’t want to reminisce about unhappy occurrences because perhaps we fear it will stagnate our capacity to move forward. While nostalgia is like the looming fog, we would be remiss if we underestimated the power of nostalgia as it relates to emotional connections with our past.

I am reminded of the power of nostalgia every time an elementary school has outlived its usefulness and is scheduled to be torn down and replaced with a new, state-of-the-art facility. Even though the neighborhood and demographic of the school may have changed dramatically, the building continues to represent childhood to adults who attended that school many years before. Often a group will form to thwart the effort to build a new school. Some groups have attempted to protect the school by having the building recognized on historical registers while others recognize the importance of energy efficiency, safety, and twenty-first century technology and only want the façade or historic elements of the original building to remain. Regardless, tremendous energy and resources are expended to bring attention to the fact that the building holds special significance to the people who are attempting to slow the progression toward the

new school building. It is now not even necessary to continue to live in the community to band with others for whom the building represents a significant part of their childhood. *Facebook* lists hundreds of electronic groups of people who are attempting to save a school from the wrecking ball.

For eight years of my career I taught in a school that represented a rich heritage in the community in which it was situated. The school was over a hundred years old and shared a parking lot with an historic church. The boundary between the playground and cemetery were almost indistinguishable and for large events, the buildings were used interchangeably. These facilities represented the hub of the community. Even though some modifications and updates had been made over the years, the hardwood floors, wood paneling, high ventilation windows and brick and marble façade had been preserved. The foyer of the school was a photo gallery of horse-drawn school buses, Depression-era teachers standing on the schoolhouse steps with bare-footed children, and portraits of many years of graduating classes. Students who attended the school often represented third, fourth or fifth generation families that were central to that community. At PTA meetings parents could be seen perusing the galleries of class photos finding themselves, siblings, cousins and parents in the numerous framed photographs on display. Teachers enjoyed longer than thirty-year careers and turnover rate was so low that many teachers taught the parents, if not grandparents of a student she currently served. When I was there, I hosted a Grandparent's Day where students brought their grandparents to school to share artifacts and stories of the "good old days." One set of grandparents reported that they met at our school forty years before under the same oak tree that shades the playground today. Historical significance in this school was so substantial that it was no surprise that the community did not want the building sacrificed for a new school building. To them, it wasn't just brick and mortar

and hardwood floors. The school represented space and place that was substantiated by nostalgic memories. Members of that community assembled in protest every time architects drew plans to build a new school or even to remove a tree so that the road could be widened. Almost twenty years later, that building still stands with all of its energy inefficiency, outdated technology, unsecure entrances and exits, and antique hardwood floors. It remains at the top of the list of “Schools Needing to be Replaced” always yielding to a school on the list where the community embraces “brand new”. I believe that this circumstance is facilitated by the power of nostalgia; the longing for the “irrecoverable past place or condition” (Whitlock, 2007, p.25). Nostalgia is not just a condition, it is an emotion.

Forasmuch as this inquiry substantiated what I already believed to be a significant part of the learning experience, as a researcher I have to ask myself what stories were not told; what information was withheld because of the mask of nostalgia? All six were from middle class homes where education was highly regarded. All six were white and had been identified as academically gifted. All six spoke nostalgically about their childhood experiences and especially Springdale School. All six eventually graduated from college with many of them earning advanced degrees. All six became successful adults by economic, personal and professional standards. Seriously, all six? *All* happy endings? *All* perfect childhoods? As I look back over all of the interviews, I must acknowledge that there are conclusions to be drawn from what was not said.

On the day of the big celebration, all of the students greeted each other and warmly embraced the teacher who had been responsible for this activity that united them. She spoke of those students fondly at the ceremony and they presented her with a bouquet of spring flowers. She reminisced with them about the contents of the capsule, enjoyed watching them beat my

current students at Quiz Bowl and even enjoyed dinner with them that night at a local restaurant when nobody was yet ready to go their separate ways. There was tremendous respect and polite banter between the students and the teacher the entire day, yet in the individual interviews when the students were asked to recall teachers who were pivotal in their academic journeys, not one of them mentioned Mrs. Robinson. Every single one of them had vivid memories of Mrs. Grenga, the teacher who taught seventh grade math and also the teacher responsible for most of the school productions. Some students mentioned another teacher or two and some mentioned teachers who were not associated with Springdale, but not one of them mentioned any bond or relationship with the teacher responsible for initiating this obviously meaningful and ultimately aesthetic and liberative learning experience. It is disconcerting that these participants could have such rich memories of a school project yet they fail to even mention the teacher responsible for the project when probed about teachers who held significant meaning in their academic journeys. A propriety that is associated with being properly cultured in the south shrouded what they may have wanted to share about their relationship with the teacher but didn't. Regardless, there is obviously a lack of relationship with the teacher associated with this project evident by the unspoken.

I also question how much these participants would have said or what they may have contributed if the conversations had been situated around the issues that plagued Macon at that time instead of just on the memories of learning. I believe nostalgia was a significant contributor to the way adults remembered these childhood experiences. While I don't doubt that they came from happy homes where they were supported in their academic pursuits, I continue to wonder if anyone had a member of their family with a drinking problem, parents with marital issues or families that faced financial hardships. Only one of the six attended public middle school. In the

yearbook I observed where a few friends penned a message about how sorry they were that she was not going to be with them in private school next year, as if continuing in public school was the exception rather than the rule. Was that a sign of a financial hardship for that family? How did that child interpret the sympathy that was extended to her by someone she considered a close friend? Did she face attending the public middle school with great trepidation? It certainly was not mentioned as that participant recounted her childhood memories. One of the students attended a couple of the private schools before finally returning to and graduating from public school. He is still a successful adult so I can't draw any conclusions about the failure of public high schools. I am left wondering why the private school did not satisfy him or his parents. It is far more uncommon for a family to leave private school and return to public school voluntarily in this town so I am left with questions as to what facilitated this unconventional decision. As the participants romantically remembered their experience in elementary school, more than one related that Springdale was almost like a "public private school". When I probed as to what that meant, they related how it was "free of disruptions, violence, and 'bad kids' and the teachers all had high expectations of them and they rose to meet those expectations," learning significantly in the process. It made me wonder where they got their notion of what "public" school was like if they thought that Springdale was some parallel to a private school. None of the participants attended any other public elementary school so where did they get the notion that public schools were full of disruptions, violence, bad kids and teachers with low expectations?

The students who attended private middle and high school did not mention how they viewed that decision that was made on their behalf almost as if they knew it was not polite to talk about such things. They were forthcoming with memories about where they chose to go to college, what degrees they earned and how they view their formal education, but they just didn't



venture into the unutterable social construction that was their hometown at that time and continues today. Families of privilege are not immune to marital problems, substance abuse or family crisis but my participants shared none of these issues. Privilege does offer the immunity of having to talk about it. True to a class reunion ambiance, only the good, the progress and the achievements were shared openly with the researcher. I suspect they were a little suspicious about my interest in them so they were carefully guarded and answered only the questions that were asked.

Perhaps if I had probed them for details about how they were situated in privilege or how attending this romantic little neighborhood elementary school affected their beings I would have gleaned an entirely different perspective. They did not balk at recounting their romantic view of their childhood through rose-colored glasses but if I had dared to ask them to speak the unutterable, I suspect they would have defended their circumstances apologetically or do what most people in this town do, hang their school decisions on religion.

In *Macon, Black and White*, Andrew Manis (2004) chronicles race relations in this town in the twentieth century. Desegregation legislation was designed to mandate that schools be racially integrated but the furor that ignited the community actually began in the churches. In a pivotal incident that many believe initiated churches taking a stand against desegregation, an African ministerial student enrolled at Mercer University attempted to worship at Tattnell Square Baptist Church, located at the edge of the campus. The pastor knew the night before that ministerial students, including Sam Oni intended to visit and decided that he would not turn away anyone who desired to worship. The deacons did not necessarily agree with the pastor and when Oni showed up for the worship service the next day, it was the beginning of a split in the congregation. Some parishioners did not believe the student was there to worship but to cause

controversy. That act of acceptance on the part of the pastor was the beginning of the end for his leadership in that congregation as well as the beginning of a split in the church that caused all of the other local churches to give attention racially integrated worship. Because each congregation had the privilege of deciding whether or not it would “allow” Black worshippers, they came to view themselves as private social clubs as much as houses of worship. When it became evident that a federal judge was going to mandate the integration of public schools despite the town’s vehement opposition, the churches decided that if they could choose who they would allow to join them in worship, they could choose with whom their children shared a classroom. So, over the next few years that followed the desegregation order, a number of churches in town planted a school, a venue in which they had no functional authority. Suddenly, everyone in town desired a “Christian education” for their school-age children. “The church had opened the Tattnall Square Academy, a private school ostensibly established to provide a Christian education to students from kindergarten through high school, but also clearly a rejection of the possibility of integrated public schools” (Manis, 2004, p.231). In the years that followed, many churches followed the lead of Tattnall Square, leaving the city for north Macon and establishing private schools that were immune to desegregation legislation.

Between 1959 and 1969 in response to *Brown* and *Brown II*, Macon’s private school count saw a 200 percent increase. Between October 1969 and July 1970, fifty-eight new private schools were opened in Georgia. In September 1970, seven months after Judge Bootle desegregated the county’s public schools, five new private schools opened their doors in Macon. (Manis, 2004, p.313)

Many of the private schools that opened as a response to the desegregation order have since closed, but Tattnell Square Academy remains open, yet struggling to enroll enough students to meet its financial obligations.

The phenomenon of White flight from the public schools has had negative repercussions for the public schools in Macon.

Despite attempts to diversity both the makeup and the curriculum of the county's private schools, the drift of white students toward private education or homeschooling has resulted in a largely re-segregated Bibb County public school system... These trends have hurt the public school system by diminishing the overall support and siphoning off students from wealthier families and stronger educational backgrounds. (Manis, 2004, p.315)

Decrease in public school enrollment led to a decrease in FTE funding and increased resentment toward those schools from the taxpayers who support the public schools while paying tuition for their own children to be educated at an exclusive academy. After desegregation, some parents were still not satisfied with the integration of neighborhood schools so they filed a petition with the court indicating such. In 1978, the school district was placed under federal court mandate to force further desegregation by offering a majority-to-minority transfer that allowed a student whose race was in the majority at her neighborhood school to transfer to a school where her race represented the minority population. For almost thirty years, Black students were granted transfers to the predominately White schools out in the edges of the county. In 2006, a group of White parents began to challenge the majority-to-minority transfers citing that the influx of transfer students led to overcrowding in many schools, requiring mobile classrooms and less time with specialty classes and resources such as the media center and computer labs. In 2007, a

federal monitoring of the Bibb County Public Schools resulted in the lifting of the desegregation order as the district was declared unitary.

It seems that each time a community group gives rise to a racial inequity, there will be conversations, deliberations and whipped up emotions until finally a judge has to enact an order regarding schools. While it is unfortunate that decades after Integration, we still can't make the best decisions for our community's school children without the intervention of a federal judge, it is likely the reason that private schools continue to thrive in Macon.

As I reflect on the memories that were shared by the participants I recognize that those cherished memories represent significant learning but none of them represents knowledge that can be measured and documented, therefore none of this learning is assigned value in the school, at least by today's standards. Our schools and the entire notion of learning are currently imprisoned by high stakes testing so much that we fail to validate any opportunity for learning that cannot be quantified. Standardization and test driven curriculum quantifies aesthetic and liberative aspects of learning, imprison the mind, conform critical thinking, sabotage imagination, and deprive possibilities for all children to learn in meaningful ways (**Finding 5**).

As millions of tax dollars are spent each year in the education of children, tax payers, business owners, and corporate America are demanding to see evidence of what they are getting for their investment because they don't see sharp, articulate, motivated workers in the employment pool. If we stop to consider that this is a societal problem we might be able to concede that it will take more than a teacher to correct this issue. But, as the teachers are the ones who take the money, we are the ones responsible for proving that we earned what we were paid for the previous one hundred and fifty days worth of work. It is widely accepted that the lowest common denominator of the issues plaguing society is teachers. The public outcry for

accountability for teachers has rendered us fabricators and the students, products. In order to determine if a learner has mastered what he needs to know to be considered educated, the accountability piece is dependent on the efficiency of measureable data. Even before I collected this data, I knew that our dependency on tests was misguided. Earlier in my career, tests were used to inform me of which students had mastered the content and which ones still needed work. The one yearly state exam was used for determining how much progress a learner made in one year and for diagnostic purposes. Students were compared to no one other than themselves. School funding and teacher pay were not tied to the single instrument. Peter Taubman (2009) refers to this overdependence on accountability data as an “audit culture” (p.88). Everything that is important to the dominant social class must be reduced to quantifiable data.

Tests have always been a tool that educators used to benchmark performance, but only in the last decade have they come to represent so much more. Taubman (2009) asserts that educators have long used tests as formative and summative assessments to provide a snapshot of what a student has mastered at a given point in time. But, they have also been used as sorting and gate keeping devices. As we consider the extent of the testing movement today, it is clear that tests are not only influential in determining the future of students, teachers, administrators and schools but these instruments have also become influential in shaping curriculum and classroom practice.

The proliferation of tests and the weight assigned to their results have also created the need for services, products, and technical systems that not only offer to make sense of the vast quantities of data generated by these tests, not only offer extra help in negotiating these tests, but also offer to address the unavoidable failures the results will indicate. (Taubman, 2009, p. 52)

The way the general public embraces testing as an answer to determining what is wrong with children, teachers and schools, we have begun to believe this process is both normal and acceptable. “The normalization of testing regimes has begun to affect how we value our experiences. If the only measure of an experience is a standardized test, it becomes increasingly difficult to employ language attentive to the nuances of meaning” (Taubman, 2009, p.52). We are urged not to simplify learning in a way that requires a student to choose a correct answer among multiple choices. We must be attentive to the many and various shades of learning an experience offers.

To embrace the notion that something as dynamic as learning can be measured on a test is problematic, but to measure a teacher’s effectiveness through the data provided by that test is unforgivable. Curriculum scholar Bill Ayers (2001) cautions us that believing that a teacher’s merit can be evaluated via students’ performance on a test is a myth. “Learning is not linear; it does not occur as a straight line, gradually inclined, formally and incrementally constructed. Learning is dynamic and explosive and a lot of it is informal; much of it builds up over time and connects suddenly” (Ayers, 2001, p.15). There is no magic bullet, no single instrument that can be constructed that will evaluate the effectiveness of a teacher. It must be done on a day-by-day, observation of the class and immersion in the process of the learning opportunities and experiences that are provided to the learners.

Our current dependence on the test did not happen rapidly but gradually, getting more and more severe with each school year. I am ashamed that even though I saw the stakes getting higher and the pressure ratcheted up with each subsequent year, I idealistically tried to perform the required miracle. Resisting the pressure precipitated by the test caused teachers to be accused of holding low expectations or believing that all children can’t learn. I saw colleagues struggling

to achieve an impossible goal, concerned that they were going to be at least publicly chastised if their students failed to meet expectations and at worst, non-renewed. I witnessed the frustration of teachers, the apprehension of parents and anxiety of students regarding the test. I did not appreciate the pressure, the threats and the heightened testing hype that swelled in the school each spring but I failed to do anything about it. Resisting only causes people to question why you might be afraid of being accountable. I resented that a year's worth of my work would be evaluated not by observations of my lessons and my interactions with students but by how those students happened to perform on a given day on one test each year. I grumbled about the impropriety of requiring students who can't read on a second grade level to take a fifth grade test or students who can't sit up and feed themselves to even hold a pencil and attempt to make marks on an answer sheet but it was always met with sympathetic, however helpless agreement.

Every spring when I am needed to proctor a test, administrators carefully choose my assignment...usually a hallway guard position as experience has taught them that I get all lathered up if I am proctoring the test with a group of students and I observe noticeable anxiety in children due to the high stakes. They are not doing me a favor as much as they are themselves because it is easier not to have to deal with me than it is to change what we are doing that is not beneficial to children. The stress and pressure that used to be only on one school day per year has ignited like a mushroom cloud. We now have so much riding on how the students will perform that one day that we have now adopted multiple benchmark tests, diagnostic tests and cognitive abilities tests to predict how students are going to do on the one very important test. Every single lesson is related to the test. Even though we don't have enough money to put soap and paper towels in the restrooms we always have the money to purchase coach books that prepare the students for test taking practices. There is never enough money to hire more teachers and reduce

the student-teacher ratio but there is ample money to hire more administrators to coach and/or police the teachers. The state is experiencing such financial distress that they are required to furlough teachers to balance the budget but there is always money to purchase the many testing materials. As the testing time draws near, we wear t-shirts, make banners and have pep rallies to “encourage” students to do their best on the test (as if we assume they wouldn’t do it anyway). This makes me question who really has the low expectations; the teacher or the state. Last year, over forty days of instruction was interrupted or sacrificed entirely for the benefit of these standardized tests. That represents twenty-two percent of our instructional time for only the standardized tests, not including formative, summative, evaluative or weekly assessments. This epidemic is no longer about a single test. How soon will this balance tip? We are doing more weighing the cow, than feeding the cow.

The state of Georgia doesn’t fare well when comparing our test scores to other states so the pressure is increased to improve our rating. Last year, over three hundred teachers in Atlanta were stripped of their teaching credential due to a cheating scandal that rocked the headlines of newspapers all over the state. As soon as I read that three hundred teachers had “cheated to improve their own performance rating” I was immediately suspicious and questioned the pressure they were experiencing to make the scores better at all costs. I wondered why teachers would risk the license they were granted as a result of years of study and multiple degrees in order to make something look better than it actually was. Turns out they admitted to being threatened with losing their jobs if they didn’t do whatever the administrators told them to do in order to make adequate yearly progress. So, in the evenings after testing, teachers assembled in conference rooms armed with pencils and erasers and told to “make it right”. This linear mentality of doing whatever it takes to make the data show that our school is adequate is



troubling at best. Rather than invest thousands of man-hours investigating teachers who were responsible for having tests with excessive erasures, we should be asking where the pressure to cheat originates and how far-reaching this trend actually is. We should question how one professional could be evaluated by someone else's answers on a test. This practice is as absurd as measuring a dentist's effectiveness based on how many cavities the patient has! To combat the temptation to give a false impression of the progress of the students in a given class, the state department now has purchased machines that scan answer documents to determine how many erasures appear on the answer documents and assume that if there are too many, there must be cheating. The threat of being caught in some testing impropriety is so prominent now that I document every time I see a child erase an answer and I notify the office immediately if one inadvertently skips a line making all answers after that one incorrect unless they erase everything in that column and correct the tracking mistake.

As I communicate with other scholars in small groups about where this runaway accountability train is headed, I am more anxious than relieved. Is the magic date of 2014 going to be a time to celebrate that our high expectations and attention to detail and our data collection finally enabled us to reach the Promised Land that every child, in every grade, at every level of learning will be performing on grade level? I am guessing not. I am more inclined to believe that we are going to experience some type of academic Armageddon where legislators will finally say that we didn't know what we were doing and they are not paying for it anymore. They will use that opportunity to get out of the education business once and for all, give everybody a voucher and tell them to go buy whatever education that voucher affords them. For a place like Macon, it will be segregation all over again. The affluent children will continue to get their excellent educations in their pristine buildings and their track toward college will not be interrupted. I

expect the haves will pay the additional fees necessary to attend these private schools even if they have to mortgage the house or get a second job to afford it. I expect a few charter schools to spring up and take whatever amount the voucher will pay to educate/babysit these children, but they won't be able to pay for the most experienced teachers or the best resources, so the have-nots will continue to have not. The ones I am concerned about most are the students with special needs, whether academic, emotional or behavioral for whom private schools have no place. The privilege of a private school is the right to choose whom you want to educate. If you can't perform on grade level or you can't behave or you are diagnosed with any affliction whatsoever, the school can gently suggest to the parent that they are just not equipped to serve their child, regardless of the parent's capacity to pay.

As I reflect on the damage to schools and to children that was facilitated by one piece of well-meaning legislation, I am offended. I am professionally insulted that my practice cannot be evaluated by observing what I do on a daily basis but is ultimately evaluated by how my students perform on one test on one day out of the year. The human connection that is so valuable to learning has been completely removed from the equation and my effectiveness is being determined by my students' abilities to select one correct answer among three distracters. I feel dejected that the students with the greatest needs are ultimately the ones who are going to pay the greatest price for our inability to perform the prescribed miracle.

In some states, teachers are offered pay for performance. If their students perform well on the test, teachers are rewarded with money. As the research indicates that money is not the default motivator for teachers that most thought it was, administrators are left scratching their heads. As a professional, I find this notion decidedly offensive. To offer to pay me more money if my students perform at a higher level on the test presumes that I am holding back to some

degree negotiating my own contract for greater remuneration. I believe that most teachers would agree that they give one hundred percent effort to students every day, not for the extrinsic reward of higher pay but for the same reward that led them into the profession initially; the intrinsic joy of experiencing liberative learning with the students. One of the valuable lessons that can be learned from the failure of pay for performance is that teachers are often not motivated by money. Sure we all want and need to be paid, just as anyone who performs a job to provide for a family. But it is my belief that teachers differ from other wage earners in what motivates them. A commissioned salesperson is routinely motivated by money. The more products he sells, the more money he makes, but teachers differ greatly from salespeople. If teachers were motivated by money, they would never have entered the profession in the first place. Teachers overall are vastly underpaid if you consider the amount of education, training, and hours required to do the job successfully. There is no other profession with as many people with advanced degrees as the field of education earning the low salaries that teachers do. “The broader point here is that economists have it wrong if they think of work [teaching] as a ‘disutility’—something unpleasant we must do in order to buy what we need, merely a means to an end” (Kohn, 1993, p.131). Money, while necessary to survive, is rarely the chief motivator for teachers.

The theorists who are trying to solve the supposed deficiencies in education believe that “good candidates” can’t be recruited to be teachers because of the low pay so maybe if they offer monetary rewards, the “good candidates” will come serve in a classroom. Granted, there are classrooms being led by struggling teachers and just as in any profession, there are people holding jobs that are not as successful at their jobs as their counterparts. Offering more money to produce higher scores will likely be more successful in producing cheating scandals, class roll stacking, and teacher/student favoritism than it will in producing students who are more skilled

at taking multiple-choice standardized tests. I don't know if the theorists will ever conclude that students, even if they can successfully choose the right answer on a multiple choice test, are not necessarily educated, properly skilled, or capable of thinking for themselves. In an attempt to standardize opportunity facilitated through education, we have essentially reduced education to a few, unrelated bits of information valued by the dominant social class.

In *The Public School and the Private Vision*, Maxine Greene (1965) reminds us of how relatively new a concept public schooling really is. For centuries the young assumed an apprentice role and learned a skill or craft under the tutelage of a skilled artisan. Only elite males were granted an opportunity for a formal education.

The men who argued for the cause of common schools linked them to the ancestral Promise and to the images of the American Dream. Not only would the schools provide a common experience and a common heritage for the diverse children of the nation, they would also equip the young for responsibilities of freedom, insure universal equality, and guarantee prosperity through the years to come. (p.1)

It is only within a few centuries that the notion of education as the American Dream has transformed into a cultural prescription to produce a skilled workforce and facilitate uniformity from diversity. Today we are still seeking this universal equality and a guarantee of prosperity by exploiting the environment of school.

After a quarter century as a teacher I have concluded that change is the only constant in education. The landscape has changed, the demographic of children served in this district has changed, neighborhoods have changed, content, standards, goals and assessments have changed, resources have changed, expectations have changed, and certainly legislation governing schooling has changed. The transformation in the way we offer education to students today is

dramatically different from when these participants walked the halls of Springdale Elementary School. We should not expect the former students to return three decades later to find students, teachers, classrooms and learning to be exactly as it was when they were elementary students. As learners and communities and schools transform, we are presented with not only an opportunity but an obligation to cultivate a landscape of learning that engenders “active learners, engaging learning content, inquiry oriented learning strategies, culturally inspiring learning environment, culturally responsible policy making, creating learning evaluation and assessment, caring and challenging teachers (He et al, 2010, p.100) where learners, teachers, educators, parents, community stakeholders, administrators, and policy makers work together to inspire all learners to reach “their highest potential” (Siddle-Walker, 1996) (**Finding 6**).

This inquiry substantiated the notion that when students are involved in active, meaningful learning opportunities and they are personally connected to the content, the experience becomes one that is viewed as worthwhile when it is reflected upon later in life. The participants acknowledged that the school itself was a nurturing environment where they felt that teachers, parents and the community were all committed to the work that they were doing. It was not just one teacher or one project that made the difference. It was a combination of all of the elements that facilitated the investment that these learners have grown to appreciate. The participants admitted that when they were seventh graders, they only saw the value based on their enjoyment level but when they applied an adult perspective, they recognized the significance of such an experience.

The participants were asked to identify specific skills or lessons that they learned in the elementary school. I was expecting more of them to recall some of the hallmarks of elementary learning such as multiplication and division or states and capitals. Instead, they recalled lessons

of pride and humility, tragedy and triumph, negotiated relationships and overcoming adversity. When thinking about making friends, participating in the play or running the three-legged race on field day, Trevette offered, “I think I learned as much by doing those things as I did from any academic lesson. Frankly, until I got to Georgia Tech to graduate school, I don’t think I learned a whole lot of stuff out of books that I use now on a daily basis. I mean in elementary and high school I learned how to be a person in society.”

When asked about the significance of his early education, Stephen chose to examine the word etymologically. “It comes from the Latin root meaning to lead or to conduct...so, I think education is an avenue where you are led or you find a path out into the world. Education is an opportunity to keep going further and further from the place where you began.” Stephen’s statement was most philosophical. He was able to appreciate the skills that he learned that constituted the building blocks for all future learning but he also recognized that everything about the experience of schooling contributed to finding his own path into the world. We measure whether or not a child has mastered three-digit subtraction by age seven or if she can identify the reasons for America’s involvement in World War II by age ten, but the attributes that are more significant to her being such as intrinsic motivation, creative inspiration, cooperativeness, dependability, tolerance and ambition are reduced to one benign category; conduct. We teach desirable character traits in every elementary school but because they are not measured or scored, they are not regarded as valuable.

As I reflect on my own educational path into the world, I recognize the dichotomy between what was deemed important and what was superfluous. The areas where I excelled were not measurable, therefore not valued. The areas where I was deficient were used to build a case for failure. My school district currently faces a crisis of a fifty-six percent drop-out rate. We have

new visionary leadership that is attempting to tackle the problem by meeting with all of the teachers, administrators, district employees, parents, and community stakeholders to develop a strategic plan to address this concern. Discipline and apathy are two of the greatest obstacles our district is tackling. The solution up until now has been to expect every student to go to college. High expectations and accountability have failed us. Instead of engaging students in their personal interests and offering them an avenue for success in the world, we have accelerated the number of students who rebel and leave the environment that is designed for their “benefit.” How might our district change if we were as committed to finding what constitutes success for that learner and capitalize on it rather than measuring how far he is from meeting our standards?

At our recent strategic planning meetings this fall, I was assigned to a group of district employees who were unfamiliar to me. I discussed my vision for allowing students to experience success in whatever capacity they chose and bringing back vocational opportunities to minimize drop-outs and the high school teachers scoffed. They hold fast to preparing the students for the kind of academic rigor that will be experienced in college and maintaining order via the grade book. I assert that only works for those students who are going to college and those who value the grades. The high school teachers argued for a place to send the students who are apathetic and disruptive because they are exhausted trying to deal with them. As every teacher is a product of college coursework, that is her only frame of reference. Teachers did not attend vocational training. They did not develop a passion in high school that could not be fulfilled in more classrooms. Someone has been modeling for them how to be a teacher since they were five years old! Consequently, we continue to do what was done to us because we were the beneficiaries of schooling as it has existed for decades. We claim to embrace and appreciate diversity but we do not. We only validate those students who easily fit or can be stuffed sideways into a mold that

we carved out. Until we abandon the notion that every student will go to college and genuinely try to facilitate success of students at whatever they choose to learn, we are going to continue to lament that our drop out rate is too high, and our community is going to continue to pay the price in violence, crime and economic stagnation.

In his address to the congregation of 4,500 district employees and community stakeholders, our visionary leader shared statistics such as ninety percent of the jobs in twenty years will require post-secondary education. We were all sufficiently worried that fifty-six percent of our young people will be competing for ten percent of the jobs. On the same night, I was watching an economic segment on the national news. It was a story about a high school senior with three job offers in an economy where many highly educated people cannot find employment. The student had been participating in a sheet metal fabrication program at a progressive high school up north. This eighteen-year-old student was situated to begin a career making twenty-six dollars per hour. This story made me think that if that student were situated in my hometown, he would likely have dropped out of high school and would be destined for a lifetime of minimum wage jobs. Even if it was realistic to expect every learner to graduate from college, someone will still need to lay the bricks, roof the houses, cut the sheet metal, drive the trucks and install the plumbing. Our society has a place for everyone but that place is not the same. Our access to our place should be consistent and should be provided on that avenue toward our place in the world.

A visionary leader or a few committed teachers cannot facilitate this systemic change. It is going to require an investment from every stakeholder in the community to implement the kind of changes that will produce the freedom necessary to facilitate success for every learner at every level.



## EPILOGUE

In the role of teacher, I am now a stranger (Greene, 1973). I go to the same familiar place each day but I cannot approach the same tasks the same way. The landscape of learning masquerades as meticulously groomed but all I see are the weeds choking out new growth. I see five-year-olds arriving at school eager to learn only to have that joy stifled and stuffed into an uncomfortable mold by the time they go to second grade. I see teachers running on a hamster wheel; engaged in frantic activity but ultimately going nowhere. I see students developing anxiety with physical manifestations at the pressure of another test. I see administrators ratcheting up the policing of classroom teachers attempting to justify why our scores are so low. I see politicians making promises regarding education in an effort to attract industry when they have no real control over any of the variables. I see congressmen attempting to legislate results. I recognize that this problem is not one that can be solved inside my classroom walls or even inside my school. This is a systemic issue that will require a revolution instead of just having teachers acquiesce to the paradigm that all students can learn. Likewise, nothing will ever change if I jump off the sinking ship and admit defeat. My position as a teacher affords me an opportunity to create an aesthetic space for experiential learning and the freedom to learn alongside my students. “Maxine Greene reminds us...that freedom is linked to the capacity to imagine a better world, linked as well to a coming together of many people to identify deficiencies and obstacles. Freedom, then, requires consciousness and collectivity and action” (Ayers & Miller, 1998, p. 155).

This opportunity for freedom is fashioned with powerful pedagogical possibilities. It is not enough for me to simply provide opportunities and aesthetic spaces to explore. This study

requires me to reevaluate my obligations and commitment to my students. In *Teaching Toward Freedom*, William Ayers (2004) posits that

Our foremost commitment must be to our students: ... We take their side as learners, supporting their efforts to become wiser, more capable, more enlightened and we take their side as citizens, encouraging their own specific and collective pathways toward freedom. We recognize and support their full humanity. We resist every attempt to degrade, diminish, or reduce them. (p.105)

Freedom is not linked to the capacity to only imagine a better way to educate. It requires a conscious wrestling with the obstacles in order to advance toward the goal of reaching a high potential. "We want to create situations in classrooms that will release our students for live and informed encounters. We want to make the richest sorts of experiences possible; we want choices to be made" (Greene, 2001, p.27). As teachers we cannot dismiss the value of awakening the students' consciousness to the aesthetic value as if it were art. In an aesthetic space, everything is art.

As I step back and survey this landscape, I recognize that we don't need to simply improve education; we need complete transformation. Legislators or administrators or teachers cannot accomplish this alone. Transformation of education will require an investment from every stakeholder with a vested interest in public schooling. Though we often credit ourselves with gathering input from the interested parties, curricular decisions are almost always made on behalf of students, rather than with them. Someone else decides what content will be introduced and evaluated during each year of schooling. Students may be given a small degree of latitude when it comes to the method in which they will demonstrate mastery of a particular curricular objective but we never empower them to determine when or if a particular objective should be

even be taught. “They are excluded from what is worthwhile in and for teaching and learning” (Schultz, 2010, p.5). Until we break the paradigm that teachers are keepers of knowledge and students are depositories, we will not achieve the desired transformation. As long as we continue to prescribe the objectives that will be mastered by a particular grade level for the students without their input, education will continue to be an act that is done *to* the students rather than *for* them. “A great deal of potential lies in looking to kids as teacher educators for insight about what it takes to motivate and engage them” (Schultz, 2010, p. 5).

I am not going to change the landscape alone. As a single stakeholder I can, however, challenge the prescriptive nature of schooling as it exists and create for my students an aesthetic space for experiences that will facilitate meaningful learning. I can have a progressive vision for school as a space that inspires learners to achieve according to their own passions. I can take advantage of the learners’ natural propensity for popular culture to engage in learning experiences that can promote liberative learning and purposeful living. I can listen to my students and empower them take a measure of responsibility for what and how they want to learn. I can purpose to cultivate culturally responsive relationships with the students I serve recognizing that we are in a reciprocal learning relationship that is worthy of respect. I can actively, impatiently, wrestle with obstacles that marginalize or exploit students for the purpose of collecting data to measure teacher or school effectiveness. I can advocate for students to be viewed as creative, diverse, complicated individuals rather than merely streams of data derived from their performance on a myriad of standardized tests. My own awakening to freedom in the aesthetic space where learning originates will be the avenue for the change I can create in my place in a much larger, more complicated arena of education.

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