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# Perspectives on an Arts Magnet School : the Voices of Elementary School Children

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PERSPECTIVES ON AN ARTS MAGNET SCHOOL: THE VOICES OF  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

by

DENISE ROBLES-TORRES

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
in  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:  
CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Portland State University  
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

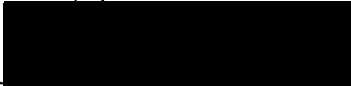
The abstract and dissertation of Denise Robles-Torres for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction were presented June 12, 2007, and accepted by the dissertation committee and the doctoral program.

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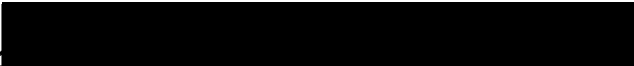
  
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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Denise Robles-Torres for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction presented June 12, 2007.

Title: Perspectives on an Arts Magnet School: The Voices of Elementary School Children

Since the beginning of public school as a social institution early in the nineteenth century, the voices of children have been missing from the discussion about school. From the progressive era to the current standards based movement, structures of education have been premised on the ideas of what adults think are the best ways for children to learn. But educators and other adults are recognizing the importance of student perspectives by providing children opportunities to participate in critical reflection about school. By including children of all ages in this discussion, educators, policy makers and researchers may begin to examine their own assumptions about student learning, subject matter and educational policy.

A phenomenological approach was used to describe the lived school experiences of five 6th grade children attending an arts magnet school in the Pacific Northwest. Phenomenology focuses on the individual lived experiences of the study participants and how their understanding of those experiences shape the phenomena under study. The research question was this: How do children perceive and describe their experiences of school? Data were collected through three in-depth interviews

of each participant. An iterative process of questioning, information giving, analysis and verification was characteristic of the entire study. Through a process of phenomenological reduction, 5 themes emerged from the data: (a) Feelings, (b) Learning, (c) Relationships, (d) Time, (e) Orderliness. Limitations of the study included the small sample size and the possibility of researcher influence on participant responses because of perceived adult/child power differentials.

The goals of this study were to engage children in conversations about their experiences of school and to add to the existing body of literature that currently features the voices of children.

DEDICATION

For Aidan

May your voice always be heard

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a long and eventful journey, a journey that would not have been possible without the personal and practical support of many people.

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I wish to thank the staff of Sojourner School. The love and respect they have shown to me over the years has inspired me to continue forward as we work

together to create a culture where the voices of children can be heard and respected.

Finally, my greatest debt of gratitude goes to the children who participated as co researchers with me in this study. Their honesty and serious commitment to this work has paved the way for generations of children to come who will speak and be heard.



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## INTRODUCTION

Carefully listening to what children have to say about school is important because today, more than ever, schools are experiencing greater student diversity. Emerging from this diversity are thousands of students who “experience a reality relatively unknown to the adults who govern their school experiences” (Silva & Rubin, 2003; p. 2). Adults who generalize student experiences as a single reality ignore the role of children as active agents in their learning (Fielding, 2001).

Traditional adult centered models of instruction have positioned children as passive recipients of knowledge for decades. Further, personal attitudes, past experiences, and perceptions of control by adults within the educational system may have also served to minimize the voices of children in school. Children have a lot to say about school. By listening to their stories, educators and others may develop informed perspectives and take practical action that will refine practice and enrich the school lives of all children (Oldfather, 1995).

A review of educational literature that follows indicates that educators and policy makers are beginning to see that perspectives of children are central to the improvement of educational practice. This can be seen by the growing body of literature and student programs that illustrate the possibilities for the broadening roles of students in schools. For example, high school students in Puyallup, Washington have helped to create the mission, guiding principles, and the school constitution for a new high school (Fletcher, 2001). In Hartford, Connecticut, four



school districts are participating in a student action research program that engages fifth and sixth grade students in identifying and researching issues that affect the quality of education in their schools (Institute For Community Research, 2003).

This dissertation describes a phenomenological research study that explored the lived school experiences of children in a small arts based magnet school.

Located in the Pacific Northwest, this school serves approximately 174 students in kindergarten through sixth grade, and has been in operation for seven years. The participants in the study were 5 sixth grade students who attended the school.

It is hoped that through this exploration educators and others who work with children will become more conscious of the insights of children and allow those insights to inform their thinking about educational policy, teaching, and learning. Additionally, this study may serve to extend the growing body of knowledge that has documented the lived school experiences of children in elementary school. Finally, this study may challenge educators, policy makers and others to examine their own assumptions about student learning, subject matter, and institutional rules.

The overarching question that provided the framework for this study is this: How do elementary children perceive and describe their experiences at a particular arts magnet school? Because phenomenology seeks, as a method, to illuminate and describe the meaning of phenomena within the lived experiences of those participating in that experience, a phenomenological study devoted to documenting,

through in-depth interviews, and photographs, the school experiences of elementary age school children has best lent itself to this project.

The following sections of this dissertation will continue the discussion regarding the school experiences of children within the structure of public education in America. An exploration of significant educational literature on this topic will precede a detailed description of the research methodology, the findings and the analysis process. The final chapter will present a discussion regarding the implications for practice, possible areas of future research, and reflections on the research process.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

In the research literature about education there has been much written about children in school. However the day to day aspects of school and the ways children navigate within educational settings have been, for the most part, taken for granted by the educators and other adults working within those settings (Weis & Fine, 1993).

Within the last few years though, policy makers, educators and researchers are beginning to notice how the perspectives of children may impact educational policy and practice (Fletcher, 2001). Though the studies reviewed for this dissertation focused mostly on middle and high school students, educators and researchers are realizing the importance of inviting children of all ages into the discussion about what they experience in school. For example, one of the distinguishing features of the Reggio Emilia approach to preschool education is the emphasis on children's symbolic languages in the context of a project oriented curriculum. Children contribute in meaningful ways to their school experiences by setting their own learning goals and deciding on their choice of projects. Interaction with loving adults happens constantly as children create thoughtful and imaginative work (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Drawing from the fields of education, psychology and sociology, this literature review is divided into two parts. The first section will provide a brief historical context that discusses how educational decisions made long ago have left their mark

on public education. The second section focuses on current trends in educational policy and practice and will lead to a discussion of the academic literature that attempts to present the perspectives of children within various school contexts.

### *Historical Context*

Since the beginning of formal education children have been described in many ways. From the Calvinist view of children as corrupt and evil beings to an image of *tabula rasa* or blank slate (Locke, 1823) children were considered to be in need of tight control by adults if they were to become good and useful people (Koetzsh, 1997).

Keeping children under control and “in their place” took the form it has today from the industrial revolution in the 19th century (Cook-Sather & Resinger, 2001). The notions of efficiency and discipline came to dominate early 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking throughout society’s institutions, including education (Conley, 1993). With the subsequent development of behaviorist models of psychology—most notably those of B.F. Skinner—educators began to explain learning in terms of strictly observable behavior (Iserbyt, 1983). Measurement tools in the form of standardized tests were developed (Gardner, 1991) in order to measure and separate students by ability, and to control curriculum content and teaching practice (Barzune, 1991). In the classroom, children were guided through teacher-as-expert curriculum that offered few opportunities for children to share about their learning.

Progressive educational movements oriented toward placing children at the center of their learning have always run parallel to the traditional factory model of education but they have “remained the alternative rather than the norm.” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.4) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher and political theorist, rejected the Calvinist view of children as evil and self indulgent. Instead, Rousseau felt that children were naturally good and that the emotional dimension of human nature was just as important as the intellectual dimension. Education, according to Rousseau, was not just a matter of filling a child with information. Rousseau felt that it was important to understand that educating children meant that the adults who cared for them would help children to develop their innate creativity and natural goodness.

Building on the work of Rousseau and others, educational theorist, philosopher and social thinker John Dewey (1859-1952) and other educational progressives such as Francis W. Parker and Ella Flagg Young (Graham, 1967), argued that education must be a reconstruction of a child’s lived experiences and that those experiences must reflect the life of society (Dewey, 1916). Dewey believed that the purpose of education was not to fill a child’s mind with theoretical knowledge and abstract ideas (Spring, 1986). Rather, the purpose of education, according to Dewey, was to help children develop an interest in their world and to become active members of their community.

The progressive ideas of John Dewey helped teachers to explore new methods of teaching and learning (Gardner, 1991; Downs, 1975). In the era of progressivism, from about 1896 to approximately 1940, teachers argued against the standardized curriculum, age grouping and the linear approach to teaching that was part of the bureaucracy of public school (Cuban, 1984). However, the changes that these progressive educators focused on left intact the basic system and hierarchical power structure of the school (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001) and centered on the social processes of education (Deschenes et al., 2001). Classroom experiences did improve for some children because of progressivism (Ravitch, 2000), but despite these and other alternative school movements, the enduring top-down model of education, in place since the beginning of public school remains the familiar and dominant model of teaching and learning (Cuban, 1984). Advocates of progressive education continue to believe that children must be at the center of education and of their learning (Duckworth, 1996). This belief is evident as practitioners design educational programs such as Montessori and Waldorf schools that encourage the use of developmentally appropriate school experiences that are based on the knowledge of how children learn. The following discussion of constructivism highlights continuing efforts to provide meaningful contexts in education that invite children into the conversation about their learning.

### *Constructivism*

Since the years of the progressive movement, some educators have worked to help children make deeper and more meaningful knowledge connections through the use of constructivist approaches to teaching and learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Borrowing from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, constructivist theory is made up of various strands. Though different in many ways, these strands share an important perspective, which is that learners actively construct their own understanding of the world by reflecting on their experiences and acting on their environment (Bruner, 1990; Philips & Soltis, 1998).

Based on the work of Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner and others, constructivist educators focus on making connections between facts and fostering new understanding in students (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Duckworth (1996) defines constructivism by stating that: “Meaning is not given to us in our encounters, but it is given by us, constructed by us, each in our own way, according to how our understanding is currently organized” (p. 19). Advocates of a constructivist approach suggest that educators first be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the student willing and able to learn (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Constructivist theory implies the process of building, creating, or making mental structures instead of merely absorbing or reproducing products (Duckworth, 1996). In education, the movement toward constructivism has come as a reaction to

the over-reliance in classrooms on strategies such as rote memorization and superficial knowledge of content (Conley, 1993).

Teachers embracing the central principles of constructivism think in a holistic way about the nature of learning (Duckworth, 1996). Rather than viewing learning as consisting of separate and discrete chunks of information, constructivists believe that learning occurs within the context of intact experiences (Jensen, 1998). For example, constructivist educators may use integrated curriculum, that is, a curriculum in which children broadly explore knowledge in various subjects. Skills and knowledge are developed in more than one area of study and children learn in a holistic way that reflects the real world.

Educators in a constructivist learning environment seek out and value what students have to say. They provide to children opportunities to express their point of view, and they “allow student responses to drive lessons, shift instructional strategies, and alter content” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 105).

Constructivism is not without its challenges. Teachers must create and sustain environments in which they and their students are encouraged to think and explore. This is a formidable challenge. It is difficult and demanding and takes a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. The use of constructivist approaches in the classroom does not guarantee that children will have opportunities to share about their experiences in school. But the constructivist tradition is “based on the idea of student autonomy, which is to say, the chance for students to view learning as



something under their control rather than as disembodied subject matter” (Kohn, 1993, p. 7). It will be up to educators and other adults who care for children to extend the classroom opportunities for discourse in a constructivist classroom to include the personal perspectives of children. To do otherwise is to allow dominant and persistent ways of thinking about children in education to prevail (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

#### *Conclusion of Historical Context*

From the progressives to the advocates for school change throughout the decades, adults were using schools as a way to remake society (Conley, 1993). Today it is the ever-increasing involvement of the federal government that is changing schools. The likelihood for the inclusion of the perspectives of children about their learning becomes less probable as so-called school accountability measures become more important than the children themselves.

The second section of this literature review focuses on current trends in educational policy and practice. Following this discussion will be a review of the academic literature that features the perspectives of children about their school experiences.

#### *Current Educational Trends*

Since the release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission On Excellence In Education, 1983), there has been increased federal involvement in American classrooms. This federal presence, which emphasizes new testing and accountability

features, has added yet another layer of bureaucracy to the structure of school (Conley, 1993).

### *No Child Left Behind*

In January of 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) which requires accountability measures such as annual testing of all school children at all grade levels in various content areas and adherence to state content standards. The testing is required in order for schools to qualify for federal assistance that supports low income students. Schools that fail to meet annual growth targets for test scores are described by NCLB as failing schools. Parents of children attending these failing schools are invited to transfer their children to schools with higher test scores, which define them, according to NCLB, as better schools.

Some critics of NCLB feel these mandates may promote a narrowly defined, mechanized approach to teaching (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fletcher, 2001) and one that defines good teaching as repetitive drill aimed at raising test scores (Kohn, 1993; Popham, 2001). In some school districts, pressure to achieve on the tests has forced some administrators to adopt prescribed curricula. These curricula dictate to teachers precisely what is to be taught and when. Packaged programs such as these allow teachers little room for variation in their teaching and minimize the opportunities that children may have to offer their perspectives about school (Gardner, 1993). Alfie Kohn (1993) writes that as teachers feel more pressure and

control to perform well on the tests they “create a classroom climate in which they do to children what is done to them” (p.7). That is, the more teachers are forced into powerless, voiceless positions about their work, the fewer possibilities there will be for children to express themselves about their learning.

Educators in some school districts are closely aligning curricula with what is likely to appear on the tests (Sacks, 2002) that will be used to measure student achievement, school quality and teacher effectiveness and abandoning more child-centered, developmentally appropriate approaches to knowledge and learning (Cook-Sather, 2002). The result is a fixed, lock-step curriculum that draws sharp lines between academic areas that are each taught and then tested (Fielding, 2001).

As a way to meet federal accountability demands, some teachers are using behaviorist, teacher-centered models of instruction (Kohn, 1993) that give children fewer and fewer opportunities to share their experiences about their learning (Fielding, 2001). Discussions may be led and dominated by teachers and if children participate at all it is to give the correct answers to the questions posed by their teachers (Gardner, 1991). Children may have fewer opportunities to participate in decisions about what affects them in school or about what they are learning (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997).

*Academic Literature*

In the research literature about education there has been much written about children in school. Researchers and students are forming partnerships that produce authentic accountings of their experiences. Educators and researchers are coming to a new understanding of the “recognition of the interdependence that is necessary between students and adults” (Fletcher, 2001, p.4).

The research presented in this study is focused primarily on students in middle and high school. However, children of all ages have participated in conversations focused on understanding the conditions of living and learning in school (Cappello, 2000; Igoa, 1995).

The power of listening to children in terms of improving educational practice is the premise of the work done by Shultz and Cook-Sather (2001). In a collection of eight studies, Cook-Sather and Shultz invite student perspectives into the conversation about school. Middle and high school students were the primary authors of the information. Reflecting differences of gender, and racial and ethnic background, the student authors wrote about their hopes and desires for school. Several interrelated themes were woven throughout the studies. Among these was the desire to have more human interactions with teachers and other students at school. Another theme was the desire by students to be seen for who they are rather than to be “fragmented, categorized or labeled” (p. 6). Finally, the students in these studies revealed that they wanted teachers to make learning more engaging and

relevant to their lives. Students in these studies were very clear about the importance of being actively involved with their learning by creating partnerships with their teachers.

In a similar study designed to ascertain how adolescents view what is significant about school and about learning, Phelan, Davidson and Yu (1998) draw on case studies of high school students to present the ways in which young people deal with issues involving school. The purpose of this study was to listen to the experiences the students were having within the context of school in order to identify behaviors that teachers had defined as important in terms of student learning. Both of the above studies focused on the perspectives and lived experiences of young people in school. Both identified key characteristics that students attached to successful learning. The work of Cook-Sather and Shultz (2001) however, was not focused on what adults thought about certain behaviors as was the work of Phelan, Davidson, and Yu, but rather it centered on what the students themselves were concerned about regarding their schooling.

In a study conducted over a three year period, Corbett and Wilson (1995) conducted a series of interviews with a cohort of 247 sixth grade students from six schools across the nation. Through informal interviews conducted in casual settings throughout the schools, students provided descriptions of the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment as they moved from classroom to classroom over the years.

Through this interview process, researchers learned that students valued teachers who provided extra support with school and personal issues. The study also revealed that students wanted teachers who believe that they can succeed in their learning and who listen to them about what they are interested in learning. Researchers found that when teachers listened to students about their needs and wants, achievement scores on standardized tests rose and there were fewer issues of absenteeism and truancy. Finally, students said that they wanted teachers to include a variety of activities in class and to use content that was reflective of and relevant to their lives.

An important conclusion of this study was the support of the researchers for the inclusion of students as partners in the learning process. Based on the findings of this study, teachers and other educational leaders would “find out they have valuable partners in the educational enterprise-if only students had the chance” (Corbett & Wilson, 1995, p. 128).

Similar results were revealed in a qualitative study conducted over a two year period (Mitra, 2003). Over one hundred semi-structured interviews and observations carried out in high schools across the United States revealed that listening to student concerns about their school experiences helped to minimize the distance felt between students and teachers. This decrease in student alienation helped to build trust and understanding between teachers and students. Teachers began to see students as

partners in classroom decisions and students felt more comfortable about sharing their lives in order to bring those experiences into the classroom.

The Spring 1995 issue of *Theory into Practice*, titled “Learning from Student Voices”, presents a variety of articles that discuss the ways in which teachers need to pay attention to children in their classrooms. For example, studies by Dahl (1995) and Heshusius (1995) report that by listening closely to children, teachers can create a learning environment that fosters and encourages learning. Teachers can also become more effective practitioners: “To understand children’s perspectives in school is to gain some insight into how they make sense of and integrate instructional experiences. It serves as a way to see the classroom from children’s eyes” (Dahl, 1995, p.119). Johnston and Nicholls (1995) discuss the use of constructivist approaches in the classroom and the necessity of listening to children as part of constructivist teaching: “In this view, the good teacher would provide conditions that permit ongoing inquiry in which student themselves take some authority” (p. 96).

In another article from this collection, Penny Oldfather (1995) discusses what students learn when they are given the opportunity to share about what motivates them at school. Four high school students were invited by Oldfather to reflect on their experiences about schooling as they moved from middle school into high school.

The results of the study discussed the benefits of including students as researchers, but Oldfather also describes the tension she felt in terms of retaining control of the data while fairly representing what the students had to say: “In our writing, how can I represent voices of students in the fairest ways possible and, at the same time, avoid relinquishing our roles in interpreting findings?” (p. 134).

This study clearly features the experiences of these student researchers as told in their own words: “True to the respect of students and their ‘honored voices’ that has informed both the research process and its findings throughout, the students speak for themselves here without intervening interpretation” (p. 139). The research shows that students deeply desire to pursue learning related to their interests and to express their ideas creatively. Results also show that students value teachers who allow them to bring their lives outside of school into the classroom. Other issues regarding growing control of students at school and the lack of personal autonomy were also reflected in the data.

#### *Synthesis of Academic Literature*

The literature examined for this study, though not exhaustive, is representative of the ways that researchers have explored the experiences of children in school. There is a growing awareness in educational research regarding the value of listening to children share about their school lives and the input of children is beginning to find its way into the dialogue about school at many levels. But the research examined for this paper appears to “advance the arguments and authors’ positions



rather than the perspectives of children” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 8). Though the perspectives and experiences of children are included, it is the authors of the studies who may be providing the frameworks for interpretation and sometimes the focus of discussion regarding the issues which the students address.

The exception is the work done by Penny Oldfather (1995) and her team of student co-researchers. Clearly, the words of the children featured in this research ring true, but Oldfather discusses the tension of allowing this to happen and still maintain the rigor of the interpretation of the data.

The results of some of the studies featured in this literature review reveal the wishes and desires that children have about their schooling. (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Dahl, 1995; Mitra, 2003). However, discrepancies exist between what children desire and what the realities of school life present. For example, current trends toward the use of behaviorist teaching methods in education are creating a growing distance between teachers and students instead of creating partnerships between them. The narrowing of the curriculum and the ongoing use of content that relates little to student’s lives clearly represents an educational mismatch that does nothing to elevate the perspectives of children about school.

The goal of adults throughout the years has been to improve education, but the voices of children may not be considered in this process until educators and other caring adults believe that those voices are as important as the policies and practices of school.

There are a growing number of studies within educational research that indicate a developing interest in understanding how children are engaged in the process of learning (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997; Fullan & Pomfret, 1992). Research has shown that listening to children may have an impact on their self confidence and self esteem as well as on the relationships with the adults who care for them (Mitra, 2003; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). This in turn reflects in their motivation to learn as well as to take risks in new learning. Studies have also shown that teachers who listen to children may be more effective in responding to their academic needs (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Dahl, 1995). But much of the research concerned with exploring the perspectives of children has more to do with what adults want to find out rather than with concerns children may have about their experiences in school.

Giving children a chance to express their views and share their experiences requires adults, at all levels of education, to relinquish some power and control over what happens in school (Cook-Sather, 2002; Weis & Fine, 1993). Without a broader vision and more informed understanding of what happens to children in school, as told by the children themselves (Lincoln, 1995), teaching and learning may continue to be an adult-centered endeavor that positions children as the passive recipients of knowledge (Fletcher, 2001; Oldfather, 1995).

### *Conclusion of Literature Review*

By highlighting the perspectives of children about school, adults may begin to know who children are at a deeper level by becoming more conscious of their insights. When asked, children have valuable information to share with educators and other adults. This study may help educators see how the perspectives of children may help them make learning more meaningful and engaging for their own students. Finally, this dissertation will help educators and others examine their assumptions about teaching and learning and the roles of children in education.

Throughout the history of education the most important people involved have been left out of the conversations about and planning for education. The literature highlighted for this study has shown that children have insightful ideas about what would make their learning more meaningful and engaging. However, current educational reforms may be diminishing cooperative democratic classrooms and making the inclusion of student voice in the classroom less likely. Educators, relying on teaching methods that will ensure competent test scores, are abandoning constructivist infused instructional design and teaching practices that may foster students' self esteem and motivate them to succeed.

The following sections of the dissertation will include a detailed description of the methodology used followed by a discussion of the findings of the research. The study will conclude with an in-depth reflection on the research process and a synthesis of the key discoveries.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

The main goal of this study was to highlight the voices of children as they described their day to day experiences at a small arts magnet school in the Pacific Northwest. Five children from the 6th grade class at Colson School were chosen to participate in the study through the use of in-depth interviews. Once this information was gathered and analyzed, the next goal was to synthesize the information into a set of recommendations that would be shared with the staff members at the research site. A final goal of this study was to add to a body of literature in education that may help educators, researchers, and other caring adults better understand the complexities of school life for children.

The following sections of this chapter will explain the methods of data collection and data analysis as well as validity issues and ethical considerations.

#### *The Phenomenological Approach*

It is difficult to understand the experiences of children without understanding the meaning that they attribute to those experiences (van Maanen, 1997). To attempt to quantitatively explain the personal knowledge of children by coding it into operational variables is to ignore the richness and diversity of their perspectives. For these reasons, I utilized the phenomenological interview method as a way to gather data about children's lived experiences in school.

Phenomenology is a descriptive methodology of human science and was initially developed by the German philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Within the phenomenological tradition there are multiple meanings for the kind of research described as phenomenology. Perhaps the most frequent applications of phenomenological research in human science inquiry come from the *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology* (Moustakas, 1994). Known as empirical phenomenology, the most distinguishing feature of this approach is the fact that it focuses on the meaning human beings make of their experiences and that within those experiences “there is an essence or essences that can be narrated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8).

Though phenomenological research has ties to other essentially qualitative approaches, including ethnography and hermeneutics (Valle & King, 1978), pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain and to start from a perspective that is free from hypothesis or preconception through the application of epoch and bracketing (Husserl, 1931).

Because the primary goals of this research were to describe the lived experiences of children attending Colson School and to give voice to those experiences, I designed my study so that I could access information directly from the children who were involved in the day to day activities at the research site. Even though this situation was ideal in terms of meeting the goals of the project, I knew that I would need to work very hard to approach the interviews and subsequent data

analysis aware of my own preconceptions. I realized that my position as teacher and co-founder of the school may have some impact on my perceptions. In order to start from a naïve perspective and to maintain that perspective throughout the research process, I created an epoch that would help to bracket those presuppositions that might have some impact on my perception.

A detailed description of how epoch and bracketing were applied in this study will be presented in subsequent sections.

#### *Rationale for Method*

Debate regarding research methodology in the humanities, social sciences and education has been ongoing since the late nineteenth century (Beghetto, 2002). Increasing dissatisfaction with the absence of certain types of research questions, particularly in these fields of study (Lather, 1991) has led to frequent use of qualitative methods of inquiry in other professions (Bogdon & Taylor, 1991).

For example, using phenomenological research methods in the area of nursing, (Paterson & Zderad, 1988; Sundin, 2000) researchers have sought to describe what nurses do and how they do it beyond the scientific principles they are taught in nursing school. The researchers in these studies, themselves nursing professionals, recognized that there was much about nursing that was not explainable in scientific terms and that this was an important part of the healing process for patients. The goal of these studies was to increase the awareness of nursing as art as well as science, noting that much has been written about the science in nursing but less of

the human endeavors woven throughout the work of nursing professionals. Paterson & Zderad (1988) write that “Humans are the only beings conscious of themselves. Nurses are human beings. As such we are capable of looking at our existences, choosing our values, giving our world meaning, and of constantly transcending ourselves or becoming more” (p. 69).

In qualitative studies utilizing interviews and surveys, sociologists explored and described the lived experiences of Latino street gang members in efforts to illuminate possible strategies for prevention and intervention of at-risk youth (Boyle, 1992; Calabrese & Noboa, 1995). Conducted within the street context in which the participants spent much of their time and felt most comfortable, interview questions strove to elicit from the participants descriptions of early school experiences, parental relationships, and possible reasons for gang membership. Through the descriptions provided by the participants, researchers were able to discover turning points in the life experiences of the participants where interventions by criminologist, sociologist, educators, or law enforcement personnel might have proven useful in the struggle to keep children out of gang culture.

Finally, in a study examining leadership, (Van Der Mescht, 2004) researchers described the perceptions of educational leaders about themselves, their followers, and their organizational contexts. The author of the study chose to design her study using phenomenological methods because of her objection to previous studies which attempted to define leadership in terms of a “teachable science” and educational

organizations as “distinct from the actions, feelings, and purposes of people” (Van Der Mescht, 2004; p.5). Van Der Mescht goes on to say that the use of qualitative methodology within a phenomenological research design “has the power to present convincing portraits of reality that ring with authenticity, so that readers recognize themselves and their working contexts” (p. 12).

This study attempted to provide rich and descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of elementary age children as they navigate through their days in school. The use of qualitative approaches within a phenomenological research design has provided the framework that will help hear the voices and describe and understand the school experiences of children attending an arts magnet school in the Pacific Northwest.

#### *Research Setting*

The location for this study was Colson School, a small kindergarten through sixth grade, arts magnet elementary school located in a suburban school district in the Pacific Northwest (Colson is a fictitious name used to preserve confidentiality). Founded in 1998 by myself and three other district educators, Colson School served 174 children who came to the school by bus from across the district. Of the 174 children attending Colson School 20% spoke a language other than English; 15% received free or reduced lunch; 12% received special education services; and 10% had been identified as talented and/or gifted. An interesting phenomena of this study was that I had never been the teacher of record for the class from which the



participants were drawn. By that I mean that the year they would have come to me, the teachers at the school shifted grade levels. With the exception of elective classes or general day-to-day interaction, my contact with them had been less than that of a classroom teacher. I believe that this situation may have helped to minimize some of the adult /child power differentials I was concerned about. Each of the children seemed relaxed and willing to offer quite candid information about their school experiences.

Children at Colson School begin the day with a school-wide opening focused on exercise and community building. Throughout the day children participate in integrated classroom curriculum designed around broad themes such as “beauty” or “journey”.

Beginning in kindergarten, children participate in daily music lessons in a modified Suzuki violin class and Orff Shulwerk. Based on the work of Carl Orff, this method of music instruction utilizes rhythm and percussion instruments and incorporates movement and song.

Three days a week the children visit the Flow room, which is an environment similar to a children’s museum. The theory of Flow states that one can become so intrinsically motivated and involved in an activity that they seem to lose track of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The children in this environment build things, sew, paint, solve scientific problems or just read quietly.

Pod classes are also part of the education program at Colson School. Pods are small, multi-age elective classes designed by staff and community members and selected by students. Some of the offerings have included musical theater, French, ceramics, painting and juggling. The classes change three times over the school year. In pods, students and teachers can investigate areas of high interest that sometimes lead to ongoing, more in-depth investigations by students outside of school. All students in grades one through six participate in pod classes three mornings per week for about forty minutes per session.

The founders of this school came together because we wanted to create a learning environment that would honor all children and support creativity through an arts rich curriculum. The growing federal accountability demands placed on districts and schools all over the Northwest were eliminating aspects of curriculum, such as music, physical education, and art. We felt, and current brain research verified, that these elements of education were influential to a child's growth and development (Gardner, 1991; Jensen, 1998).

For three years my colleagues and I examined the literature on effective schools, best practice, and equity and justice in education. I had the opportunity to visit model school sites such as the Key School in Indianapolis, and consult with educational experts in order to provide an enriched environment for the students who would attend our school. Yet even with our child-centered philosophical perspective, not once during the process of creating the school did we invite children

into the discussion about how the program might evolve. It was not until the school was well established that we realized that we had failed to include the perspectives of children in the conversation about the possibilities for their learning.

It was this realization that served as the catalyst for choosing Colson School as the research site. I wondered if in fact the children were experiencing the school the way I hoped they would. My teaching partners and I tried to imagine how Colson School might look today if the perspectives of children had been included in the initial planning. Among the founding members and teaching staff of this school, is a desire for ever improving the opportunities children have for learning. This study has allowed me to know and understand the essence of what school is for children at this particular school. Having this information has helped me to understand how I might maximize the experiences for all children at Colson School.

### *Children of Colson School as Participants*

The children who participated in this study were five sixth grade students who had attended Colson School since kindergarten. They came from different neighborhoods across the school district so generally the only time that they saw each other was at school. All five children came from two-parent, middle-class backgrounds. The following is a brief description of each one of the children.

Soge is 12 years old and she enjoys art and literature more than math and science. She has a high interest in animals but from a service or humane perspective.

Soge is concerned with the rights of others and doing the right thing herself. She prefers quiet, introspective activities that allow her to think about what she is doing.

Soda is 12 years old and he excels in mathematics, reading and bodily kinesthetic activities. He sees the acquisition of a second language as providing an entrée to sports opportunities in other countries. Soda very much values his friends and works hard to remain connected to them during those times that school is not in session.

Sofe is 12 years old and high energy physical activities are her number one hobby. Her deep sense of sportsmanship makes her a popular teammate and friend to her classmates. Though she was born in this country, the primary language spoken at home is Spanish. Sofe enjoys challenging academic work.

Soza is 11 years old and in his spare time prefers to read and is an avid bird watcher. His long term interest in history has resulted in a global perspective and an interest in environmental issues. Soza is looking forward to further connecting his school work to issues that he cares about. Music is also becoming an area where Soza is identifying a life-long interest.

Sola is 11 years old and her favorite activities include reading, writing, and art. She is a natural leader and children at all grade levels consider her their friend. Her interests include animals, theater, and a desire to participate in community service projects.

### *Children as Co-researchers*

The work of involving the children in this study as co-researchers made sense since the primary goal was to listen to accounts of their everyday lives and experiences in school. Traditionally, children have been observed, measured, and tested and the analysis of that data has relied on the views of adults. As an educator with a constructivist worldview, it made sense to involve the children more fully in the work of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The use of simple photographic equipment enabled the participation of the children and their status as co-researchers helped to challenge the traditional power imbalance between adults and children. I believe that their participation in this research project strengthened their potential to take responsibility for themselves and for others in their school community.

### *Selection Process*

Using purposive (Patton, 1990) sampling techniques, five children from the 6th grade class at Colson School were selected to participate in the research process. (see Figure 1) Though small, a sample size of five allowed me to navigate through the lengthy phenomenological data gathering and analysis process in a timely way.

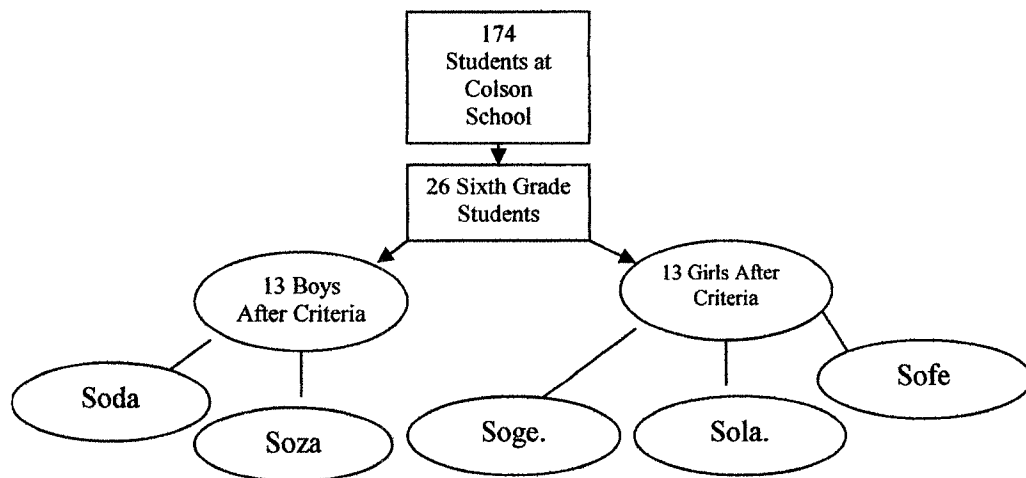


Figure 1: Participant Selection Process

The small sample size also allowed me to gather rich and in-depth information that contributed to the understanding of the school experiences of the children. Effort was made to choose participants distributed across gender, racial, and ability groups.

To begin the selection process and as a way to achieve representativeness, I divided by gender the group of 26 sixth grade students into two lists. Each list consisted of 13 boys and 13 girls. To these lists were applied a set of criteria that included; attendance at Colson School since kindergarten, full participation in school programs, and regular attendance, meaning no more than five to seven absences per year. The application of these criteria narrowed the lists to eight girls and six boys, any of whom I felt would be able to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences. The next step was to begin contacting children and their families to identify five participants.

### *Contacting Participants*

After the lists of possible participants had been compiled, I began contacting by telephone the families on each list to see if they and their children wanted to participate in the study. I continued this process until I had five families who agreed to commit to the study. At this initial contact I asked families when they wanted to meet so that we could go over the study, review and sign the consent forms, and go over any questions they might have. (See Appendix B)

Four of the five families requested that I send the consent forms and a synopsis of the study home for them to read and sign. Since this was the height of a very busy holiday season for these families, I agreed. With this information, I sent a list of dates from which they could choose in order to schedule the interviews. The consent forms were signed and returned to me the following day and the scheduling dates followed soon after. Only one family chose to come into the school for a more formal presentation of the consent forms.

Despite the significant amount of time that I would require from the children and their families to complete the interviews, the scheduling process went smoothly, with only one reschedule due to a previous commitment. All of the families received copies of the consent forms for their files.

### *Gaining Access*

In order to gain access to the participants and obtain permission to conduct the study, I submitted to Portland State University Human Subjects Research Review Committee (HSRRC), an application that detailed the process by which I conducted the research. I submitted the application in September and received approval from the HSRRC in early November. Originally I planned to give a copy of the entire application to the district school board and await their approval in addition to that of the HSRRC. In fact, all that was required by the district was to give a copy of the HSRRC approval letter to the school director. In addition, I provided the school secretary with a calendar noting the interview dates and information about where the interviews would be held. This was filed in the office along with a copy of the HSRRC approval letter.

### *Data Collection Strategies*

This study utilized a number of data collection strategies. I started with the creation of an epoch that would help me bracket my own school experiences throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The primary data collection method was that of in-depth, open ended interviews which utilized an interview guide. The use of the interview guide allowed for some structure to the interviews even though they were treated as conversations. Some structure was also helpful when it came to organizing and analyzing the data.



A slightly different approach was used for the second round of interviews. The children shared information with me based on photographs they had taken around school that were representative of their experiences there. The photographs served as a way for the children to talk about their experiences while using the photos as visual cues.

Additional data collection methods included the use of a research journal into which I would write down my thoughts and perceptions or “memoes” (Miles & Huberman, 1984) over a range of matters regarding not only the interviews but other ideas pertaining to the research. I had intended to include student narratives as another source of data. However, I found that the participants had based their narratives on the photographs they had taken. The narratives offered no new information and so I removed them as a possible source of data.

### *The Epoch*

In phenomenological research, the researcher’s role is described as that of the primary data collection instrument (Patton, 2002). In consideration of this role and because I work in the environment I wanted to study, I identified my preconceptions regarding the topic I was researching through the creation of an epoch. I did this at the beginning of the study, and utilized the same interview questions that I used with the participants. The aim of the epoch and subsequent bracketing was to enable me to interact with the phenomenon by “...suspending

prejudgments, bracketing assumptions, deconstructing claims, and restoring openness” (van Mannen, 2000)

Patton (1990) describes epoch separately from bracketing as “an ongoing, analytic process (p.408). This implies that epoch should be integrated into the entire research process, from the very beginning of the study.”

Bracketing is the process by which the researcher attempts to set aside any prejudgments about the phenomena under study in order to obtain a clear picture of the phenomena. At a certain point in the analysis of the data the information held in epoch is compared and integrated with that of the research participants. Bednall (2006) describes bracketing in this way: “Bracketing occurs at those moments during analysis when a researcher examines her bracketed presuppositions and then allows those personal ideas and feelings held in epoch to “synthesize with those observations and interpretive conclusions”. Geary (2004) describes this process as “reintegration” (p.1434) which consists of “...the unbracketing and subsequent reinvestment of the bracketed data into the larger investigation” (p.1434).

The epoch then allows for empathy and connection rather than elimination of perceived researcher bias (Patton, 1990). Bracketing extends that process by “facilitating recognition of the essence of the meaning of the phenomena under scrutiny” (Bednall, 2006, p 4).

van Mannen (1997) writes that despite the best efforts of the researcher, there is no way to completely disassociate oneself from a phenomenological research

experience. But the self-knowledge I gained from the experience of epoch helped me to bring clarity and focus to my research topic and also allowed me to see the data from a naïve perspective.

### *Phenomenological Interviews*

As a way to prepare myself for each of the data gathering interviews, I took some time the night before each session to reflect on my own school experiences by re-reading and thinking about the epoch I had written. This process helped to remind me of any potential for my bias during the interviews. Though I did not take the epoch with me to the interviews, I wrote in my journal feelings and ideas that came to mind during the pre-interview reflection period. These notes accompanied me to each of the interview sessions.

All of the interviews were audio-taped using a high quality micro cassette recorder. The interviews were conducted in my classroom either before or after school and ran about twenty to thirty minutes.

I began the interviews with casual conversation as a way to help the children relax. For the most part they paid little attention to the tape recorder and were, as we worked our way through the interview protocol, open and frank in their responses. I carefully listened to how the children were responding during the interviews, to the tone and inflection of their voices, and their body language.

Any observations that I made of this kind were noted in my journal. I was also careful to wait for the children to finish their stories rather than interrupt them

with questions that I might have had. Instead, I made a quick note in my journal and asked the questions later in the interview. I ended each interview by asking the children if they had any more to add and by explaining about the subsequent interviews.

I was able to conduct all of the data gathering interviews within a two week period just prior to the winter break. After the interview series was completed I began transcribing and coding the interview data. To help with the transcription process, I used a voice recognition program called Dragon NaturallySpeaking.<sup>9</sup> By using this program I was able to significantly cut down my transcription time and produce highly accurate transcripts.

#### *Interview Questions*

For the first of the three interviews, I utilized an interview guide as a way to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were followed with each participant. (See Appendix A) The open ended interview questions allowed for the emergence of other topics during the interviews that illuminated further the topic under study. The questions for the initial interview were:

1. Can you tell me about your favorite school activities?
2. Can you tell me about your least favorite school activities?
3. What do you think is the most meaningful thing about school?
4. What do you think is the least meaningful thing about school?

5. What are some feelings that you have about school in general?
6. How might you change school if you could?

The use of questions such as these helped the children describe their school experiences without my leading the discussion too much.

The following section describes the second interview in which the photographs taken by the children became the foundation of our conversations. Though I referred to the interview guide as a way to structure these interviews, the photographs are what inspired the responses from the children.

#### *Photo Interviews*

Because I was working with children, I chose to base the second interviews on photographs that they had taken around the school to represent their experiences there. The photo interview method was well aligned with this study since one of the goals of the project was to give children a voice regarding their school experiences. This interview was also a place to expand on some of the ideas that had been discussed in the earlier interview.

Photo interviewing involves using photography or film as part of an interview- in essence asking research participants to discuss the meaning of the photographs, films or videos in order to elicit narratives from them (Becker H. S., 1974; Collier & Collier, 1986).

The idea of using photos to obtain information during the interview was especially relevant since I was working with children. As an elementary school

teacher, I have observed that children may grow tired of simply talking about what they know or they may struggle for words to accurately describe their experiences. These challenges were addressed by the use of photographs in the interview process. The photographs then became a catalyst for a supportive and empowering interview experience for the children (Mathews & Tucker, 2000).

In order to keep the conversations within the context of the research, I reminded myself of the research question and the goals of the study by jotting them at the top of the page on which I was taking notes. I laid the groundwork for this part of the study by purchasing a disposable camera with 25 exposures for each of the students in the sixth grade class. The cameras were used as part of a larger class assignment in which the students were asked to articulate through art, writing, dialogue, and photography what the experience of school meant for them.

By having the entire sixth grade class take part in the photography exercise, less attention was drawn to the 5 children who would participate in the interview process. The photographs would later be used by the classroom teacher to help all of the students create photo essays focused on the development of their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

*Photo interview kit.* The next thing I did was to create a photo interview kit. The photo interview kit is an organizational tool which allows for orderly storage and access of data. It also assists in managing the sometimes large amounts of data generated by phenomenological studies.

Some researchers recommend that the images to be used during the interviews be carefully chosen by the researcher according to the goals of the study (Collier & Collier, 1986). I placed all of the photographs into the kit because, characteristic of the phenomenological tradition, it was not up to me decide what was important enough to include and what should be left out. I felt that those decisions could be made only by the children.

Each child had their own, differently colored binder. The photographs were protected by a clear sleeve so that the children could easily remove and organize the photos during the interviews. I brought each child's binder with me to the interviews, after which they were locked in a classroom closet and then returned to their storage place in my home office.

The photo collecting timeline was determined to be about a week for all of the children. The time between the taking of the photographs, development of the pictures and the scheduling of the interviews was about two-three weeks. The staff at Colson School was advised of the assignment so as to prepare them for the possibility of picture taking in their classes. Also I encouraged them to let me know of any disruptions that might occur due to the assignment. The staff was enthusiastic about the project and in fact there were no issues related to the gathering of the photos.

Finally, students had a brief lesson on point-and-shoot picture taking conducted by the classroom teacher. This final lesson helped them to understand the basics of photo composition.

*Benefits of using photographs with children.* I believe that using photographs as part of the interview process was beneficial for several reasons. Using the photos generated by the children empowered them and helped diminish the power differential between us by enabling them to choose the subjects of their photographs and deciding what to include or exclude from the frames.

Using the photographs also helped the children capture a greater level of detail about their school experiences. By prompting deeper levels of questioning, their descriptions were enhanced and expanded. This is evident by the more complex responses offered by the children in the photo interviews compared to those responses given using only the interview guide. Additionally, during the photo interview, the children themselves were directing the conversation instead of my determining the topics, as in the first interview. My questions during the photo interviews had more to do with requests to describe what was going on in the pictures than with following a predetermined interview guide or protocol.

Finally, the photographs helped to make clear to the children the abstract concept of “meaningfulness” as it was applied to their experiences in school.



*Photo interview process.* In addition to reviewing the epoch as preparation for these interviews, I examined the transcripts and notes from the initial interviews and reviewed the photographs taken by each child.

I scheduled sessions of about thirty minutes but the children were quite engaged with the photographs and the time sometimes went a few minutes longer. Though there was much activity in the school during these times and some minor interruptions did occur, nothing seemed to disturb the flow of the interviews.

At the start of each interview I checked to see if the children had any questions, concerns or anything they wanted to add to the conversation, things that may have occurred to them since our last visit. In some cases, the children had thought about our previous interviews and wanted to talk again about a particular topic and of course we did.

For all of these children, the photo interview session was the first glimpse they had of their photographs and so they were excited to look through them. I asked the children to arrange the photographs that were meaningful to them by groups or themes. This activity encouraged the children to make decisions about which images they might want to include or exclude in our conversation.

The classroom tables allowed plenty of room to lay open the photo interview kits and pull out the pictures so that the children could take them out of their protective sleeves and arrange them as they wished. Except for pictures that were

too out of focus to make sense of, all of the children included all of the photos in their groupings.

I asked the children to describe what was going on in the photographs. The subject matter in the photos helped the children to remember other experiences in school as well as life outside of school and helped them to verbalize their perceptions in a more articulate and complete way than they had in the first interviews. Many of the conversations during these interviews strayed away from the actual photos but they remained focused on the school experiences of the children.

After we finished going through the pictures, I asked the children if they had any questions or concerns or anything else they wished to discuss. I thanked each of them and explained what I would be doing with their transcripts and that we would get back together to go over the information they had given me.

The transcription and coding process was the same as with the previous interviews. However, the tapes and subsequently the transcripts were quite lengthy, another clear indicator to me of the power of visual images in interview settings with children.

The purpose of the third and final interview was not to collect data but rather to have the children verify that the transcripts were correct. Because of their age, I offered to the children the final summary of the transcripts which contained the “big ideas” from their interviews. After some questions, all of the children confirmed that I had recorded their transcripts accurately.

*Research Journal and Memos*

I maintained a research journal as an ongoing record of the perceptions and ideas that emerged while I was conducting the interviews and throughout the analysis process. Using the concept of “memoing” (Miles & Huberman, 1984), I took some quiet time after each interview to reflect and record my thinking about the experience. These field notes represented what I heard, saw, experienced and thought as I collected data and reflected on it. For example, I made notes about themes and ideas that seemed to be emerging that might be of significance in relation to the study as a whole. The research journal was used throughout the collection and analysis process and beyond.

The notes were dated and the memoing, as a rule, was done as soon after the interviews as possible so that the information remained fresh in my memory. However, on some days it was not until late afternoon that I had a moment to myself and could think and write about the interview experience.

*Data Collection Timeline*

The following timeline illustrated the period of time from the point of approval from the Portland State University Human Subjects Research Review Committee to the final revisions of the dissertation. Though a timeline by nature is linear, there was some overlapping of the time in which the procedures were completed:

November 6<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Early in this month I received approval from Portland

State University HSRRC that my request to begin my research had been granted. In this month I also wrote my epoch. I contacted participants and their families and arranged meeting times. At these meetings, I obtained signed consent forms and set the times for the three interviews.

December 1<sup>st</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>, 2006

I conducted the protocol interview. Approximately one week later I conducted the photo interviews.

December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007-January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007

During this time I transcribed the interviews. Once the transcription process was completed, I compared the transcripts with the tapes once more to check for accuracy. The transcripts were reviewed and central summaries were written for each of the children. At this point I contacted the children to schedule the final data check interview.

January 25<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2007

The data check interview was conducted at Colson School.

February 1<sup>st</sup>-April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007

I began writing the findings and the conclusion to the study.

April 15<sup>th</sup>-May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Revisions to final draft were made during this time.

The timeline above reflects the various points in time of data collection and analysis for this study. The activities are represented in a compartmentalized way

but this was not the case. Much as the central themes which emerged from the study were not independent of each other, neither was the data analysis process. Even as the findings and conclusions were being written, I found myself going back into the transcripts to verify various points of interest.

The following section of the dissertation provided a detailed description of the data analysis procedures. This description served to explain those processes that were used to organize and examine the raw data.

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

The analysis of the interview transcripts was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns in the data through thematic codes. “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 2002).

As a way of thinking about the data, I utilized the grounded theory method in this study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) write that, “A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (p. 23).

To begin analyzing the data, I carefully listened to and transcribed the audio recordings and reviewed any notes taken during the interviews (Maxwell, 1996). To assist me in the transcription process I chose a voice recognition computer program

called Dragon NaturallySpeaking 9. Developed by ScanSoft, Dragon NaturallySpeaking 9 converts speech into text in a highly accurate way. By running the interview tapes in one ear and dictating what I heard into the microphone that came with the program, I was able to transcribe the interviews in a timely and accurate way.

After the initial dictation, I went back over the transcripts by listening to the recordings again and making any corrections at that time. This process also provided another opportunity to interact with the interview data.

At the conclusion of the transcription process I had approximately sixty pages of single spaced text to review. I followed the following procedures for each of the ten interviews.

To organize and analyze the raw data, I used a modified version of Ratner's (1997) phenomenological procedure for identifying themes in verbal accounts (see Table 1). Once again I read and re-read the transcripts in order to identify those statements made by the children during the interview which helped to illuminate their school experiences. To do this I considered the literal context, the number of times a statement had been made and also how it was stated (Patton, 1990). The memos in the journal sometimes helped with this task as I referred back to the dated entries for each interview. I placed brackets around the significant units and then used a colored highlighter to make them easy to see. I used a different color highlighter for each of the five sets of interviews.

Table 1

*Diagram of Phenomenological Method (Ratner, 2001)*

Meaning Units	General Themes	Central Themes	Central Structure	Central Summary
<p>I remember how tired I was so I just think in first grade things should go a little easier..</p> <p>I just felt like I couldn't do math no matter how hard I tried.</p> <p>I just love to write.</p> <p>Art is a way for me to express my emotions especially if I'm sad or something.</p> <p>You have a lot more ways to say what you're thinking.</p>	<p>1. Remembered how it felt to begin a full school day.</p> <p>2. Feeling anxious about school work.</p> <p>3. Positive feelings about a content area.</p> <p>4. Content that offers freedom.</p> <p>5. Ways of representing learning and knowledge.</p>	<p><u>Feelings</u> GT-1, GT-2,</p> <p><u>Learning</u> GT-4, GT-5, GT-3</p>	<p><u>Feelings</u> This child remembers how difficult the transition to full day school and hopes that adults pay attention to 1<sup>st</sup> graders now.</p> <p><u>Learning</u> Positive learning for this student included varied strategies for teaching and learning and choices in schoolwork.</p>	<p>This summary would be a composite of the individual central structures. The resulting five central summaries would then be then be integrated into a composite summary. (see Figure 2)</p>

I also placed nearby, a large printing of the research question and the goals of the study. I knew that having these reminders would help me to include only meaning units that were relevant to the questions and to the study.

From this point, I interpreted the meaning units, coded and clustered them, and summarized them by general theme. Ratner (1997) writes that:

After the meaning units have been identified, they are paraphrased by the researcher in "general themes." If the meaning unit is "Oh hell," the researcher may construe this as "anger." "Anger" will be the theme or

general theme, of the unit. (p. 138)

The general themes were then searched for repetitive statements, which were removed, leaving a non-repetitive list of descriptive meaning statements for each participant.

General themes from throughout the document were then collapsed into a new grouping. Termed “central themes” by Ratner (1997), this grouping “names the meaning of general themes.” (p. 212). These textural descriptions led finally to the “central structure” of the protocol which described how the participants experienced the phenomena. The final step in this process was to compare and explain and finally integrate all of the central structures into a general summary for each interview. A version of Table 1 was generated for each child.

Once the process described above had been completed for each of the ten interviews, I wrote a central summary for each child that integrated the information from the two sets of interviews (see Table 1). Once again, I searched for repetitive statements. These were removed and I was left with descriptive, non-repetitive meaning statements for each participant.

Following the completion of these central summaries, I conducted the data check interview with each of the children to determine if the essence of the interviews had been correctly illustrated. The children felt that the information was accurate and I proceeded to the next step in the analysis process.



Taking the information from each of the central summaries, I concluded the organization of the data by writing a composite summary for each of the children in the study. (See Figure 2)

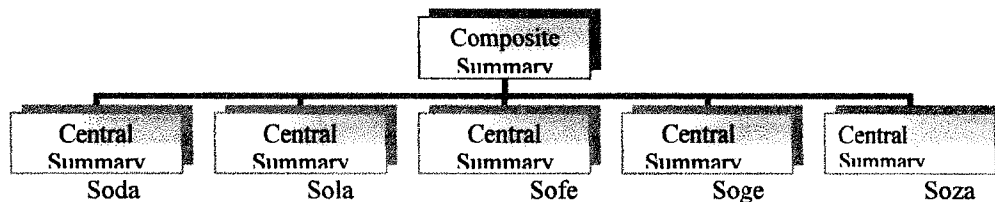


Figure 2: Integration of Participant Central Summaries

This summary reflected the context from which the themes had emerged (Moustakas, 1994) and that I felt went “beyond the data to develop ideas about the phenomena” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 139). Once the composite summary was completed I read it through several times. This procedure helped me to note particularly striking themes and to compare them with comments made by the children. The results of this process were described in the Findings section. In the subsequent Discussion section I engaged those items held in epoch with those of the children in the study and offered an interpretation of the findings.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

In order to ensure that ethical considerations were met, I:

1. Obtained Human Subjects Approval;
2. Obtained child and family consent for participation and to record and publish results;
3. Outlined all possible benefits and drawbacks for children’s participation;

4. Did everything possible to ensure privacy and confidentiality for children, including masking their names, protecting under lock and key photos transcripts, consent forms, and field notes.
5. Invited children to verify data they had provided for accuracy and authenticity.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

This study was limited to the perceptions of five children and me at Colson School. However the children that were selected provided rich and detailed information about their experiences in school.

The research focused on the experiences of children at Colson School and the results of the study may not prove to be as useful to educators working in larger schools with more traditional programs, although there may be some concepts and ideas that may prove useful to educators beyond Colson School.

Considering the extremely busy holiday time of year in which the interviews were conducted, I worried that the children might be unable or unwilling to complete the entire interview process because of family vacations or activities. In fact, all of the interviews went smoothly, with the exception of one that had to be rescheduled outside of the timetable I had hoped to follow.

All of the interviews were conducted at Colson School. This was a good choice despite my concerns about interruptions and possible reinforcement of teacher/student power differentials. The children seemed to find the context of

school inspiring and it encouraged them to provide very candid insights into their day to day experiences.

Finally, I worried that my role as the researcher might have some influence on the responses of the participants. I think that the semi-structured design of the questions helped to put the children at ease. That is, the conversational style of the interviews was not unlike conversations that we may have had during the course of the school day. I was also careful to attend to my body language and facial expressions. This way the children were less influenced to respond in a certain way.

A potential disadvantage of using an audio recording device was the issue of intrusiveness, not just for the children but for me as well. The children were initially aware of the device but soon seemed to forget that it was on the table. I, however, was constantly aware of it. For, despite my careful planning for malfunctions, I did not trust that the machine would continue to roll tape throughout the entire interview session. I found myself somewhat distracted in the earlier interviews. I conducted the interviews with a minimum of difficulty and experienced no significant technical issues.

The phenomenological analysis described in this section was a reflective activity that began the work of understanding the essence of the experience of school for the children in this study. In the following chapter I presented a detailed discussion of the findings obtained through that analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

As stated in Chapter 1, the goal of this study was to elucidate and describe the school experiences of children at an arts magnet school in the Pacific Northwest. In Chapter 3, I described an analytical procedure in which interview transcripts were examined for patterns and structures that were pertinent to the research question. The themes which gradually emerged from these patterns and structures reflected the multifaceted experiences of the children in this study.

In this chapter, I describe the research findings. Specifically, I list the general and central themes and support them with appropriate excerpts from the transcripts.

### *Themes*

The following is a discussion of the themes that emerge from the data. This discussion begins to develop a descriptive picture of what school means to the five children in this study.

### *General Themes*

The general themes in this study were identified by the clustering and summarizing of meaning units in the interview transcripts. (see Table 2) Another way to consider the concept of general themes was that they were the broadest category of themes in the organizational process of the raw data. Many of the general themes were similar enough to then be grouped together into another category identified as the central themes.

### *Central Themes*

The essence of the experience of school further emerged through the five central themes that were distilled from the general themes. The five central themes were: Feelings, Learning, Relationships, Time, and Orderliness.

Table 2

#### *Findings: General to Central Themes*

General Themes	Central Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling anxious</li> <li>• Feeling happy</li> <li>• Feeling cared for</li> <li>• Responsibility and concern</li> <li>• Curiosity and interest</li> <li>• Freedom and choice</li> <li>• Empathy and compassion</li> </ul>	Feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for expression of self</li> <li>• Having choices</li> <li>• Least favorite/favorite subjects and activities</li> <li>• Feeling anxious</li> <li>• Feeling excited/motivated</li> <li>• Feeling cared for/supported</li> <li>• Meaningfulness</li> <li>• Relationships with teachers and other school staff</li> <li>• Communication with teachers</li> </ul>	Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships with peers</li> <li>• Giving/getting support</li> <li>• Feeling anxiety/nervous</li> <li>• Feeling confident</li> <li>• Meaningfulness</li> </ul>	Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being bored</li> <li>• Feeling tired</li> <li>• Feeling rushed</li> </ul>	Time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School/classroom rules</li> <li>• Physical environment</li> <li>• Security</li> <li>• Feeling safe/secure</li> <li>• Feeling anxious</li> </ul>	Orderliness

It should be noted that these themes were not regarded as independent and self-contained categories which were qualitatively unrelated. Rather, there were connections and relationships within the different themes. These connections were described in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Table 3 presents a frequency table which notes the number of times a central theme was mentioned by the five children in the study. All of them produced at least two examples of each of the central themes with the exception of the Orderliness theme. Only one child did not produce an example of this theme. However, results indicated the generality of themes across the children's responses and suggested that these children reported experiences that described school uniquely for them.

Table 3

*Frequency Table: Central Themes*

Participant	Relationships	Feelings	Learning	Orderliness	Time
Sofo	5	7	9	2	3
Sola	6	11	5	4	5
Soge	8	19	14	4	3
Soda	8	10	11	3	6
Soza	6	7	10	0	3
Totals	33	54	49	13	20

Despite the differences in the total number of times a central theme was mentioned, each child did tend to discuss a particular way of experiencing school.

The assumption here then was that the central themes most frequently mentioned by a child indicated that this particular theme was of significance to him or her. As an example, for Sola, the central theme of learning emerged five times. For Soza, it emerged 10 times. Based on the information in Table 3, it can be assumed that for Soza, the central theme of learning played a more significant role in his school experience than it did for Sola. Given this assumption, results suggested that different ways of experiencing school are dominant for different children although the central theme of Orderliness was least frequently expressed and that of Feelings was most frequently expressed.

In the previous section of this chapter, general and central themes were identified. In the following section I describe the central themes in detail accompanied by quotations from the children that support each description. As a way to organize the following discussion, I begin each theme description with a table that contains illustrative transcript segments. Following the table are complete quotes that I believe exemplify the theme that is discussed. Finally, the quotes are followed by a brief narrative that further discusses the theme.

The themes which emerged consisted of variations in the form of different features. These features reflected the great variety of the children's experiences of school within the respective themes and therefore made each theme what it was. According to van Manen (1997) then, it is the different themes which make the phenomena what it is.

### *Feelings*

For the children in this study, school was made up of a great many feelings that were woven into the majority of their school experiences. As a way to better describe this theme, I organized the discussion into five sub themes that were arranged in no particular order of precedence: curiosity and interest, responsibility and concern, freedom and choice, compassion and empathy, and general feelings about school. Organizing the themes in this way allowed me to adequately account for all of the experiences reported by the children. The sub themes also helped in accounting for the many nuances attached to the children's feelings.

*Curiosity and interest.* For this sub theme, the focus was on the children's interest in the workings of another school. Sola was also curious about how activities and academic programs might differ:

I don't have a clue what another school is like. It doesn't appear in my head.

It's all like Colson School, but I don't know that and all I've ever heard is rumors and stuff that I can't say are true. I'd like to see it, figure out what they're missing at that school that I have here or what we're missing here that we might get if we went to another school. (Sola, protocol interview)

All of the children in this study had attended only Colson School since kindergarten. Their curiosity and interest had been piqued about how other schools operated because of school visitations, sporting events and conversations with



friends who were attending other schools. The small environment of Colson School allowed for much personal attention given to each of the children. In some cases students were provided with materials and resources for projects or other school endeavors. If needed, students spent one-on-one time with teachers in order to clarify difficult concepts. Based on information from alumni or older siblings, the children in this study worried that they might have a difficult time without that personal contact with teachers.

Table 4

*Transcript Segment: Curiosity and Interest*

Participant	Description
Soza	“I don’t think I can take as much music in middle school” (photo interview)
Soge	“I’d like to feel what another school is like” (photo interview)
Sofe	“I’m nervous about going to junior high” (protocol interview)

That curiosity was also tinged with some worry at the thought of leaving their familiar and small environment and beginning all over again in a much larger situation. Sofe’s comment in Table 4 was representative of similar comments made by all of the children

The children described feelings of concern regarding the limited options that would be available to them in terms of music, second language, and art. (See Table 4) They knew from talking to older siblings that rather than being part of the regular school day, content areas such as these in middle school are considered to be electives.

As noted in Table 4, this was of special concern to Soza, who had just this year discovered a special interest and capability in his music. He had been planning to incorporate more music into his school day as a way to make it a larger part of his life

*Responsibility and concern.* This sub theme was described by the children in terms of the care and concern they felt for the younger students at the school and the assurance they provided to peers who may have been struggling with school demands.

The children described many opportunities to demonstrate their responsible behavior at school:

Well, we usually help each other, like for example X and Y have more trouble than we do because they've been here less time. So we go over and explain to them or ask them "So, how are you doing?" or "Can you do it?" And we like, help each other play it and we say "Oh, we're right here."

(Sofe, photo interview)

Individual and social responsibilities were important goals for Soge. Throughout her day, she had opportunities to solve her own problems in school. This inspired in her positive feelings, confidence in her abilities, and a sense of being in control of her behavior and her school life:

I think we should take responsibility more for our actions, like when we're not doing something we're really supposed to be doing. Even if we're just pretending, our friend knows we're just doing it to have fun, another little kid might not think that and see you walking down the hall and think, "It's okay to do that because they're older." (Soge, photo interview)

The children perceived a certain level of freedom because of their respect for the rights of others in the school and personal accountability for their own actions.

For Soza and Sola, freedoms such as mentoring younger students and acting as teacher assistants at different grade levels were considered by them and others to be indications of their responsibility and concern.

In the experience of these children, part of being a 6th grader carried with it the responsibility of being unselfish, admitting mistakes and caring for others, and demonstrating those qualities through their actions.

*Compassion and empathy.* The children responded that part of their experience at Colson School involved being able to view themselves and the world around them through the eyes of others.

Table 5

*Transcript Segment: Responsibility and Concern*

Participant	Description
Soza	“a lot of little kids are watching you.” (photo interview)
Sofe	“We help our friends in class” (protocol interview)
Sola	“I like helping the teachers and regular people” (photo interview)

In Table 6, Soge described moments in which she felt left out. Those feelings inspired in her empathy for others who might have been in that situation. Sofe described some of the challenges she faced as she struggled to learn to read and write in English. Like Soge, she described how she felt the compassion of others as they supported her in her struggles.

Table 6

*Transcript Segment: Compassion and Empathy*

Participant	Description
Soge	I’ve had that feeling where nobody wants to be you’re partner.” (protocol interview)
Sofe	“I have trouble with things sometimes. Nobody laughs.” (photo interview)

These demonstrations of compassion and empathy helped Sofe to lend that same sort of support to others in need. In her photo interview, Sofe spoke of her sorrow and anger when, on a field trip into the city, she witnessed children from another school, on the same field trip, mocking one of her classmates who has autism. Her immediate response was to physically shield her classmate from the actions of the other children. Sofe did this by stepping between her friend and the other students and bringing him back to the area where her class was seated.

For Sola, the school motto, which was developed by the children at the school, symbolized one of the most meaningful things for her at Colson School:

I think maybe like our little school motto that we have here-“Be a Friend to Everybody”-that’s kind of the most meaningful thing for me. Even though it really doesn't connect to learning at all. You know, basically, you're not really going to learn, like I've learned this from the past and I know how it makes people feel, if you're having an off day and someone's sitting there and maybe they're gossiping, you're not really going to learn from that and you just try

to be kind to everybody. (Sola, photo interview)

Through their years at Colson, the children in this study have participated in various community outreach activities. For example, on several occasions the children and their classmates had written original musical arrangements and

performed them for the nursing homes in the area. After each visit the children and their teachers would discuss the event. For some children these classroom discussions brought to mind a sense of what some of the residents might be feeling in terms of isolation from their families.

Other student-driven compassionate efforts included fundraising for causes which the children found particularly moving. Some of these causes included efforts to help other school children in disaster areas and a wish to contribute aide to the plight of the manatee in Florida.

There are many other instances in which the children in this study demonstrated compassion and empathy. Perhaps it is their own small stature that compels them to identify with things less able or smaller than they are.

Though children have been guided through ways in which to peacefully solve conflicts, there was no formal program or curriculum at Colson School that taught them how to empathize or to care. Rather, adults at the school had demonstrated kindness and understanding as a part of the day-to-day life at Colson School. For example, all children at Colson had been taught how to treat things such as violins and other delicate materials with care. These lessons had helped children develop the understanding that actions have consequences. Adults also had modeled kindness by speaking gently to children and setting firm and consistent limits on behavior.

*Freedom and choice.* The children described feelings of freedom throughout their school day, both in and out of the classroom. They were clear about those activities that provided choice or inspired feelings of freedom.

Feelings of freedom were mentioned by the children when they perceived that they were able to do what they wanted to do without the interference of adults. Common content areas in which students experienced freedom and choice included writing, art, Orff, Flow and Pods (elective classes):

You know, in first grade obviously you're going to be told what to do; you don't have a lot of freedom. Now it's kind of open. I also think why people may not like stuff is because they're forced to do it. Maybe if they were more free or something or maybe if, well, sometimes kids may not like math or violin. You could have like, viola and violin and you could choose between the two. Or like in math, maybe you don't want to do geometry all the time, so maybe like, multiplication or something. (Soza, photo interview)

Intrinsic motivation was an important concept in the planning and implementation of Colson School. As a way to support motivation, school wide goals stressed learning and effort rather than competition. The staff worked hard to design curriculum that would be so intrinsically motivating that children would feel a sense of satisfaction in working on and completing their work. This sense of satisfaction would then encourage children to participate more fully in the process of

learning. Soza responded that providing more choice within the school day might encourage persistence and enhanced intrinsic motivation in some students:

I think why people may not like stuff is because they're forced to do it. Maybe if they were more free or something, or maybe if, well sometimes kids may not like math or violin. You could have like viola and violin and you could

choose between the two. Or like in math, maybe you don't want to do geometry all the time, so maybe like, multiplication or something else would work. (Soza, photo interview)

The children described experiences during the school day that afforded them opportunities to decide what they would do during the time in that class. Table 7 illustrates some of their conceptions of freedom and choice.

Soda's description of the Flow room focused on the many options available to him in terms of choosing activities in which he wanted to participate. For all of the children in this study, areas in the school in which they had to think for themselves and which seemed to them less like structured classrooms appeared to be more attractive. While the nature of these specified areas encouraged children to follow their own interests, the teachers in these classes also challenged the children to consider topics and problems that may not have occurred to them.



Table 7

Transcript Segment: Freedom and Choice

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Description</u>
Soge	“We have a lot more freedom here (photo interview)
Soda	“There’s more freedom in music than violin.” (photo interview)
Soza	“Pods are like a big choice thing. (photo interview)
Soda	“You can do what you want in Flow.” (protocol interview)

Children at Colson School participated in a very active and dynamic school day, crowded with many activities and responsibilities. Perhaps it was a natural thing that they enjoyed more those classes in which they had more choice and that allowed for more relaxed activities.

*General feelings about school.* The children described both positive and negative feelings about their school experiences. They were candid in their comments as they discussed their day to day lives at Colson School.

Table 8

*Transcript Segment: General Feelings about School*

Participant	Description
Soza	“I’m happy that I’ve been here for all seven of my years.” (protocol interview)
Soge	“I like going to school.” (protocol interview)
Soza	“I’ll miss this school.” (photo interview)
Soda	“I’d rather be home learning this stuff” (protocol interview)

The transcript segments in Table 8 are illustrative of other comments made by the children about their school experiences. The few negative comments that surfaced in the data were made by Soda who had been having minor discipline issues throughout the year. For him, learning at home would have been just as effective as being at school.

For the children in this study, feeling positive about school included the idea of getting along well with their teachers and with other adults at the school. For Soge, the notion of getting along meant that the lines of communication were open between him and the adults in the building:

One reason I like school is because I’ve never had a problem, you know, getting along with people, with the teachers. I think the main is that we can

just go see Mr. X whenever, you know like with problems. The other teachers too, but really Mr. X. (Soge, protocol interview)

Several of the children had older siblings who had attended Colson School.

Many of those alumni had occasionally come back to the school to help with tutoring or to teach a pod. All of these children had interacted with the returning students and perhaps discussion between the children and the alumni about their own positive experiences at Colson may have influenced their feelings about the school.

Based on these findings, the children in this study described feeling generally positive about their school experiences. They described feeling cheerful and secure with good relationships with the teachers and other adults in the school. In the perception of these children, school was a happy place and they were contented to be there.

### *Learning*

The children in this study described as their favorites those learning situations which allowed them some freedom of expression and a chance to be creative.

The notion of creativity and self expression meant different things for each of the children. Whether it was playing a musical instrument, painting or drawing, or writing a story, they all preferred learning activities that gave expression to their own unique styles. A common thread within those preferred activities was the idea of

choice. For Sola, it was free writing time. During this time, she was able to write what she wanted and spend some quiet time by putting her thoughts on paper:

This is a picture of me during my favorite subject which is writing. Anytime I would choose that! It's fun, just like pouring your thoughts onto paper, almost like journaling. It's something where I can reflect and see my memories in different ways than I've seen them, you know? Like you sort of realize, "Oh I did this too!" Like you pick apart your memories of your last vacation and you

see lots of different things that you wouldn't normally see. (Sola, photo interview)

Based on the idea that learning takes place through social interaction and dialogue, children often worked together in groups to solve problems or create products. For Soge, working with people with whom she chose to work was an important and meaningful part of her learning at Colson School. (see Table 9)

This was also important for Sofe. Her preference for working with a group of her peers was a way for her to feel cared for and supported. Since this had been a part of Sofe's learning at Colson School for the past seven years, it seemed to her a natural way to go about the business of learning.

Table 9

*Transcript Segment: Learning*

Participant	Description
Soge	“I like working with people and choosing my partners.” (photo interview)
Soza	“I like the projects.” (protocol interview)
Sofe	“As we get older we don’t get games or activities (photo interview)
Sola	“We don’t use computers enough.” (photo interview)

. Group work for Sofe was also a way to maximize her learning and lend clarity to things she did not understand:

I like working with other people. I like the opportunity because maybe if I were at the desk by myself always working, I wouldn’t learn a few things about other people. Because other people have different strategies. Everybody learns from different people. (Sofe, photo interview)

Another favorite area of learning that all of the children described as meaningful and conducive to their self expression was art. At Colson School the arts, including the visual and performing arts, were considered to be a basic part of the curriculum and as important as math or reading. In addition to helping children explore various American and World cultures, the arts at Colson School were a way

for the children to demonstrate their learning in alternative ways rather than strictly using pencil and paper assessments. For example, writing words and composing music depicting the water cycle was one way a group of children came to understand that process. For Soge, the arts helped her to cope with a sad time in her life:

There was this one guy, Shaw, I think, I don't remember. But he made these paintings and they would express his feelings. So we were studying him and I drew one last year that was really good and it showed my emotions. There was this big flower with a tear on it. And there was another flower with a dog inside the flower with a little blue pool. That was what I drew when my doggie died and that was kind of how big a pool of tears I cried. (photo interview)

All of the children in this study described projects as one of the ways in which they were able to express themselves. At Colson School a significant part of the curriculum was based on project work that the children did at school and at home. Children from kindergarten to 6th grade got involved in work that revolved around a school wide theme. The projects culminated in a final product or performance that was video-taped and then archived. Each year, the current project was added to the previous year's work. At the end of their careers at Colson, the children had a record of their projects from kindergarten to the time they left the school.

Although there were certain requirements, there was room for student self expression and creativity within the project work. For Soza, having control over the content of his work and the activities that he would present or perform at the end of his study was an important part of the project process:

In projects you get to choose whatever you want to study. I like making projects and stuff, you know a model or a map or something. They're fun to make. (Soza, protocol interview)

The children at Colson School participated in violin and Orff music experiences. Because of the many opportunities for self expression and creativity, the favorite of the two for all of the children in this study were the Orff classes.

Orff-Shulwerk is an approach to musically educating children in a group setting. Developed by Carl Orff in Germany, "shulwerk" is a German word meaning "work for the school". The Orff classroom integrated all facets of expressing, creating and performing. The children in these classes sang, chanted, played games, danced, moved, dramatized, improvised and played many types of instruments. They made the music and were involved in the process of creative expression. For Soda, Orff was one of the most meaningful things about school:

I just love Orff! You get a couple of instruments. It's not like you have to play this one instrument. It's recorders, xylophones, and other instruments and there's the marimbas. It's just like more fun. (Soda, protocol interview)

In an effort to foster motivation, teachers and staff at Colson School worked hard to provide children with opportunities in which they could ask and seek answers to their own questions about topics they helped to select. Teachers also developed lessons and activities that helped children to see the connections between school and their lives and encouraged them to take ownership of their own learning and accomplishments. Soda was very clear about the teachers and the classroom activities that made learning an enjoyable experience for him:

This is our teacher Mr. X and he's a pretty cool guy and a great teacher. We do a lot of fun stuff. He does a game show sort of thing and we listen to lots of different kinds of music which is something that we didn't get before.  
(Soda, photo interview)

Sola statement in Table 9 characterizes her disappointment regarding a change that she noticed in the learning activities in which she participated as she got older. In her experience, there were fewer opportunities for use of manipulatives such as pattern blocks and objects for counting, and games in mathematics in the intermediate grades. She went on to say that the use of hands-on materials might have made learning mathematics easier for her:

In math we get mostly like tests and stuff and we don't get like games or activities. Now it's more like you have to do this, you have to measure the



shape and estimate and stuff. You know it would be easier to learn it in a game I think. (protocol interview)

Interaction with computer technology was an area in their school experience in which the children had less positive things to share. The primary issue for them was the limited access to the school computers.

These limitations occurred for several reasons. Because of the small and crowded computer lab, only 12 or 13 children could comfortably work in the area. On some occasions one or more of the computers might have been waiting for repair. Since Colson School was a public magnet school the 3rd and 5th graders who attended there were required to participate in the yearly state testing. During those times classes usually scheduled to use the lab rescheduled their time:

This is our computer room standing unused and empty. I have never really used it. The only thing I've used it for is for tests and some small use of the Internet.

don't know why that is. Shouldn't it be used? Every single one of these computers, I checked, they all have dust on them, everything has dust on it. It's empty, it's sad, it smells weird. (Sola, photo interview)

The children described that even when the computers were available, they did not like the prescriptive way in which they were asked to use them.

Colson School, like other schools in the Northwest must struggled with limited funding. Computer technology was expensive to purchase and to maintain.

Teachers at Colson had to make hard decisions about how best to create rich learning experiences with the funds available to them. Deciding between bi-monthly field trips to the art museum and purchasing a new computer in order to make this technology more available to the children was just one example of those difficult decisions.

As a way to communicate with children about their learning, teachers at Colson School used feedback in the process of formative assessment. They believed that teacher feedback was a prime condition in the progress of learning. For some of the children in this study, the particular form of teacher feedback was an important issue. In Sola's experience, simply confirming whether a task had been correctly done had little effect on her subsequent performance.

Well, the scores the teachers give me, their comments and their opinions, that matters a lot. Whether it's good or bad. That's it; it doesn't matter if it's like really bad. I'll take it. It's good; it's good in my way because I know what I did wrong. Well of course there's always some bad times when they give me a score, a number, how does that help me! What am I supposed to do with that? It gives me a score, yeah, it's a three or it's a six, it doesn't matter. Like my project journal? I gave Mrs. X permission to go and circle in red pen and tell me in words what I need to improve on because I can't figure it out very well with the numbers. (Sola, photo interview)

The children in this study had become used to working on projects and real-life problems in which their growth was viewed in terms of not only the project products and the outcomes they produced but the processes they had undertaken. With the types of assessment used for this kind of student work, the line between teaching and testing became less defined for the students because they were still learning during that assessment process. In other words, assessment was done at the beginning and end of a project but it was also done during the project itself.

In 6th grade, as a way to prepare children for the middle school experience, some student work was assessed using traditional types of assessment tools and markers such as letter grades. Though many of them did well, some of the children had difficulty with the objectivity of letter grades and standardized tests.

The responses of Sola and other children reflected concern that their middle school experience might become confusing and challenging if teacher feedback and communication was delivered primarily in the form of percentage scores written on a piece of paper.

### *Relationships*

From the perspectives of the founding members of Colson School, the creation of a small school environment created a sense of belonging for the children who attended. A small school also promoted a sense of community where both children and teachers actively engaged in the process of teaching and learning.

For these children, relationships were the framework of their school experiences. Table 10 illustrates some of the ways in which peer relationships figured in the lives of the children in this study. For example, Sofe had never spent a night away from home. At Colson School all 6th graders have the opportunity to attend a one week outdoor school experiences. Sofe was reluctant and frightened to be away from home for so long. Because her friends were so supportive and caring, she managed to spend the entire week at the camp.

In Table 10, Soda characterizes his friends as the most meaningful thing about school for him. These friendships helped Soda to refine problem solving skills and helped him to gain self-confidence in unfamiliar academic areas. Soda's friends were also a source of comfort to him when times at school became more challenging.

Table 10

*Transcript Segment: Relationships*

Participant	Description
Sofe	"my friends started to support me." (protocol interview)
Soda	"My friends are such a huge deal to me." (photo interview)
Sola	"It's important for my teachers to get to know me well." (photo interview)

For example, he described how a friend helped him learn how to use technology that would help him with his spelling and with his writing:

I've never been a good speller and him and me will take turns typing. You know, we just go into a little corner and type together. (Soda, photo interview)

For these children, relationships were focused mostly on the connections with their peers; however, they often saw educators and other adults through a relationship lens as well. Children at Colson School usually spent two years with the same teaching team. Because of a change in grade levels, some children, including the sixth grade class of Colson, spent four years with the same team. Sola was clear about her desire to have as many different teachers as possible:

A lot of things at this school have to do with the teachers. I want to be with all of the teachers. You know, like maybe a different teacher every year.

(Sola, protocol interview)

Children described having contact with caring adults throughout the day. For them, having teachers who cared for them seemed to be linked to their effectiveness as educators:

This is a picture of my Flow teacher. I love this class because it reminds of Mrs. X who was the best teacher ever. She's just inventive and everything in all possible ways. You could tell she liked us, well, she has a bunch of her own

kids, but she created a simple switch out of a paperclip and some metal wires.

Flow represents a lot to me. (Soda, photo interview)

For Soda, the close relationship he had developed with this teacher allowed him to stretch his creativity in a way he found difficult to do in other areas of school. Her departure from Colson last year was a challenging adjustment for Soda. Though he continued to enjoy this class, he often spoke fondly of his former teacher.

### *Time*

An important factor in the development of Colson School was that of how time would be structured and how it would be utilized. In an effort to make Colson a purposeful place for teaching and learning, every moment of the school day was filled with some sort of activity. The children in this study were clear about not having enough time in their school day for quiet and reflective activities. Table 11 reflects some of the comments made by the children regarding their school day. Generally, all of them described the pace and flow of their day as being rushed and hurried much of the time

The feeling of leaving work or other projects unfinished was a source of emotion for the students in this study. It was not uncommon for children to feel a need for closure regarding some of their projects as way to more wholeheartedly begin something new. Leaving work unfinished for any length of time resulted in diminished interest in the completion of that work.

Table 11

*Transcript Segment: Time*

Participant	Description
Soge	"I felt really rushed." (photo interview)
Soza	"There's no time to think." (protocol interview)
Soda	"Hurry to get to class." (photo interview)
Soge	"Didn't get to finish." (protocol interview)

Some of the children described feelings of worry about not being able to finish school work. These worries were coupled with suggestions for teachers in terms of how to improve learning for children:

Well if I were a teacher I would have them read the book like at a good pace and not feel rushed and actually get the story rather than like having to hurry up. (Soge, photo interview)

In an effort to have more time for learning, there has evolved at Colson School a complicated schedule that planned out the times and places for activities and classes. The children described the schedule as restrictive in terms of other responsibilities being completed in a satisfactory way. In the perception of the children, teacher/student relationships were being compromised by the limited time allowed for passing from class to class. The children expressed some confusion by their teacher's annoyance at their tardiness when, in their perception, they were fulfilling responsibilities in a mature way:

There's not enough time at all. I mean at least give us two minutes in between and let the teachers let us be late a few minutes. I've had problems with that. Like during marimba, if we have that, Mrs. X would get mad at us because we come back five minutes late. We have to put away the marimbas. That's part of our job! (Sola, protocol interview)

The founding members of Colson School structured the middle of the day, that is, lunch and recess time, so that exercise and play would precede lunch. Lunch then would be followed by quiet time in which children could draw, read, write or just rest. Ordering the afternoon in this way was meant to rejuvenate the children and prepare them for the activities of the afternoon. For the primary children at Colson, the afternoon remained structured in this way. This year however a staff decision was made to split the recess time so as to allow more access to the playground equipment. Because of this split the children in the fourth through sixth grades had lunch first and then went out to play.

After recess, the children came in and had a short period of time for some quiet activity. In the experience of the children in this study however, it was difficult to come from a highly active period, into a class time that was inactive and meant to be quiet. By the time they had settled down from recess, it was time to gear up for a more active period or class. Soza found this transition abrupt and sometimes difficult to deal with:



We draw after recess sometimes but I've been realizing it's kind of hard. Like you're running around and then you're in here like just silently doing something and it's really kind of hard sometimes. (Soza, photo interview)

The children in this study have made clear their feelings about the overly busy nature of their day. Without opportunities for reflection and contemplation, these children may be missing meaningful and important interactions with their peers and their teachers and critical activities meant to enhance their school experiences.

#### *Orderliness*

Though this central theme was less frequently reported than the previous themes, the children spoke of these features with passion. They were able to articulate clearly their experiences in terms of these issues and the impact they had on their learning on their learning.

In the experience of these children, this central theme focused on the desire for freedom but within a set of rules decided upon by the teacher or other adult. The rules served to maintain order in the classroom and helped to define expectations for students.

In most cases the rules for classroom conduct were created collaboratively between the teacher and the children and tended to be considered more classroom agreements than rules. This collaborative model was used throughout the grade levels and was somewhat expected by the children.

Table 12

*Transcript Segment: Orderliness*

Participant	Description
Sofe	I like when the teacher assigns the seats. (protocol interview)
Sola	“We should get some better equipment!” (photo interview)
Soge	“I would start by fixing up the bathrooms.” (photo interview)
Soda	“I wish there were better water fountains and there’s no hot water”. (protocol interview)

In terms of maintaining order in the school, several children reported that the intervention of adults was essential during conflicts between students:

Well, Ms Y will just take care of things if there’s a problem. She’ll call people in  
in  
and just take care of it. If she didn’t it would just be chaos.  
(Sofe, protocol interview)

The children described their experiences with problematic physical features in the school. The solutions they developed to solve some of these issues caused unintended consequences in the form of mild disciplinary action by the adults in the school.

### *Summary of Findings*

The goal of this study was to carefully listen to what five 6th grade children had to say about their day to day school lives. The research question was: How do children perceive and describe their experiences at a particular arts magnet school? The following summary of the findings is discussed in a more complete way in the following chapter.

#### *Feelings*

Finding 1: Feelings and emotions were an integral part of the children's academic and social experience at school.

Finding 2: For these children, school was a place in which they had opportunities to demonstrate competence, help others and work as a team to meet common goals.

Finding 3: These children placed less emphasis on age and grade level situations. That is, they saw themselves as part of the entire Colson School community rather than exclusively sixth graders.

Finding 4: The children experienced school as a place in which they felt respected and were treated as responsible and capable people by the adults in the school.

### ***Learning***

Finding 5: The use of games and other teaching strategies that, to the children made learning fun, were perceived to be less available to them as they have moved into the intermediate grades.

Finding 6: Content areas that might be applicable to their later school lives were deemed by the children as having slightly more import than those they perceived to be “just for this school”.

### ***Relationships***

Finding 7: Teachers and other adults who cared for the children above and beyond their learning and who treated them fairly and with respect were perceived to be more effective educators.

Finding 8: In the experience of these children, one of the most important things about school was the social connections with their peers.

### ***Time***

Finding 9: The children in this study reported feeling a lack of time and a sense of rushing through school work and other responsibilities in order to get things done in time for the next activity or class. They perceived little time in the school day for reflective or contemplative activities.

*Orderliness*

Finding 10: In the perception of these children, the poor condition of their school interfered with the quality of their learning and with the quality of their relationships with teachers and other adults.

*Conclusion*

This chapter described the findings from the interview data in which children described their experiences of school. Illustrative comments from the children helped to provide a more direct and clear sense of their voices.

Clearly, for many of these children the experience of school had much to do with their relationships with the people who shared and shaped their knowledge and the feelings surrounding those experiences. In the following chapter, I describe the analysis of the findings and discuss the relationships between participant responses and the responses held in epoch up to this time.

## CHAPTER V

### Analysis

In the previous chapter, I presented the responses from each of the five children who participated in the study. Also noted were the central and general themes that emerged during the collection of the data.

In this chapter, I restate the research focus and briefly review the methodology used in the study. The major sections of this chapter summarize the findings and discuss their implications. I also examine the relationship between the interview responses from the participants and my interview responses held in epoch up to this time. Finally, a summary of new questions that emerged during the conduct of the research will close this chapter.

#### *Research Focus and Methodology*

Children have much to say about their school experiences and their words are full of meaning about their school lives. For many children however, opportunities to express their views about something that so much involves them have been limited. The study attempts to address this issue by featuring the perspectives of five children who attend a small, arts magnet school in the Pacific Northwest. The research question addressed by this phenomenological study was this: “How do children perceive and describe their experiences at an arts magnet school?”

Using purposive sampling techniques five 6th grade students were invited to participate in the study. Three in-depth interviews, including one photo interview experience, were conducted over the course of two weeks.

### *Participant Experience and the Role of Feelings*

In describing the unique and complex nature of their school experiences, the children often described more than one meaning of school within a given context. Different themes and sub themes were sometimes experienced together in the same situation. At other times, the children compared and contrasted different school experiences.

The most striking feature of the children's responses was the way they seemed to link their feelings and emotions to their descriptions about school. Throughout their representations of the remaining four themes of Learning, Relationships, Time, and Orderliness, the children incorporated their feelings and emotions into the descriptions. Figure 2 illustrates the number of times the responses of the children included particular feelings. The findings clearly made known the important role of feelings in the school lives of the children.

For this reason I chose to contextualize the following analysis by integrating these significant feelings into the discussion of each of the themes. The children in this study structured their descriptions as a series of stories in which, during our conversations, they reconstructed their day to day school lives. In order to honor the

children as the creator of those stories a narrative approach was used to describe and represent their school experiences.

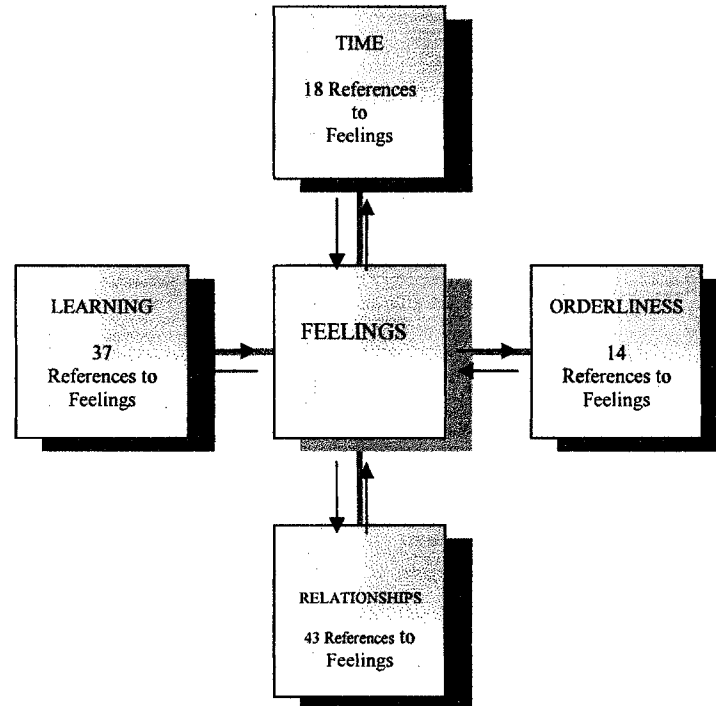


Figure 3: Occurrence of Feelings Theme in Other Themes

The children who participated in this study had a great deal to say about school and about teaching and learning. Significantly, the children's responses regarding school varied little. Despite the differences in gender, culture, or ability level, the children held mostly similar views about their experiences in school.

#### *Learning and Feelings*

For educators and others who care for and work with children, the extent to which feelings can interfere with or enhance learning is not new. At some point in



their school careers, feelings and emotions have affected the motivation and interest of the children at Colson School:

We were so excited we learned the “Star Wars” theme on the violin! Now I want to learn “Lord of the Rings”. (Soza, photo interview)

For Sofe, heightened anxiety in school diminished her capacity to learn and familiar academic tasks became confusing and difficult:

Well, when I was younger we started to play the recorder and I could not play it. We had to play a little piece and I learned it at home but when I had to play it for Mrs. X like a little test, I couldn’t remember the notes even though I knew it. (Sofe, photo interview)

Because these children spend a majority of their day in school, it was important to them to have teachers who sincerely cared for them above and beyond their learning. For the children in this study, having a teacher who cared for them meant that the learning environment was comfortable and open to exploring the possibilities of learning without the pressure of having to come up with one correct answer:

We do small groups for math and music and for other things. The great thing about small groups is that you can express more of yourself than if you’re in a bigger group. You can talk over the work and come up with answers together. When you’re in a small group you can go over and

talk things over with everybody. (Sola, photo interview)

The children were clear about what teachers could do to demonstrate caring behaviors. For some, caring meant that the teacher or other adults expressed interest in their lives outside of school. For example, having a teacher attend a soccer game or a family celebration to which they had been invited was a clear indicator to the child and her family of the care and interest of that teacher. For other children, caring was demonstrated by the teacher through the use of varied teaching approaches that addressed different ability levels and styles of learning:

This is a picture of my math journal because I excel in math. I am very good in math. Sometimes like last year Mrs. Z would pull me and X out and put us off to the side with some different problems that we got to work on. It was so awesome. My teacher recognizing my math skills made me feel special and it made me feel like I was being realized. It's not just "You class are smart." It was more like, you know, "I recognize that you excel."

(Soda, photo interview)

Finally, children had clear suggestions for the adults at Colson School in terms of how they might better show their caring and support on a day by day basis:

I think teachers need to take a little more awareness like to see how the child is reacting that day. Like, I mean something may be going on at home so you could check in, just to be sure. (Soge, protocol interview)

The voices of these children revealed that caring about them was essential in shaping learning for them. They described feeling good about being in class and believed that they were learning something valuable. Based on the responses noted in this section, the children's perceptions were that they were cared for as persons and as learners.

### *Relationships and Feelings*

Strong social relationships may enhance children's ability to relate positively with others as they get older. An important life skill such as this will help to give them power over their feelings and emotions and guide them to make critical choices about their choices and their behavior.

What emerged from the findings was that the children perceived the cultivation and maintenance of friendships as the most meaningful part of school:

Picture number five is two of my friends and they are talking to each other and I like this because it's just my friends are the most important part of school for me. We do everything together. Whenever she says she won't choose partners for us we get our stuff and I already know that we are going to be partners with each other. We don't even have to ask. (Soda, photo interview)

In the experience of the children, the early elementary years at Colson School provided a wide circle of friends:

I think it's easier to make friends when you're younger. When you get older

it's kind of like harder. I think you get closer to the ones you have but you're not as close to the ones who really aren't you're friends. You get closer to the ones you have and I kind of like that. I like having a few friends rather than like, lots and lots of them. (Soza, photo interview)

As sixth graders, the children had narrowed their friendships in terms of shared interests. Relationships for them were judged on the basis of mutual understanding, honesty and trust, and the sharing of inner thoughts with each other. The children perceived their friends as helping them with fear, loneliness, and sadness. They characterized their friendships as caring and worthy of the effort it took to make and keep the relationships strong:

It's really important to me that I get to see my friends. I know if we didn't have school we wouldn't see each other as much and that would not be good. My friends and I tell each other everything and we do everything together, more than my sister and me do! I mean, there's a ton of things you can find out just from talking to your friends. I know that I can count on them and they can count on me. The connection with my friends is so important to me that we talk in the middle of class, just to get the talking in! (Soda, photo interview)

It is generally known that the transition from sixth grade to middle school may be difficult for some children. For the children participating in this study, the transition carried with it some additional worries. The children described feelings of

distress over the fact that they would not be attending school with many of the close friends they had made at Colson over the years. Colson is a magnet school and so the children would be attending their neighborhood middle school. They stated that the idea of making friends all over again was causing them some worry:

I'm nervous about going to middle school! I think I'll be okay with school stuff. None of my friends will be coming with me; they're all going to another school. I think it will be fun but sorta hard and scary at the same time. (Soza, protocol interview)

The importance of peer relationships for these children was clear. In direct and sometimes poignant ways they described how they felt about their friends. In some instances, children spoke of gaining confidence from friends in order to try new things and feeling sad and lonely when they had trouble connecting with them. Friends for these children were a source of emotional support.

Finally, the children spoke of friends as helping them to learn. They described solving problems together and passing on knowledge, both academic and otherwise.

Developing friendships was a healthy part of growing up and for the children in this study, peer relationships were emphasized in a very distinct way.

### *Time and Feelings*

Lack of time and feelings of frustration had caused some of the children in this study to make a less than serious effort to closely examine information. By skimming over important ideas instead of allowing time for their own thoughts, the children may have missed the real meaning behind content.

The founders of Colson School wanted to create an enriched learning environment with many varied and diverse activities. In order to accommodate the classes and activities that made Colson School unique, a strict and complicated schedule had been developed. Much as in other schools, the schedule regulated activity so that everything happened in the right place and at the right time.

In the experience of the children, the demands of the school day caused a mix of emotions and feelings. While they enjoyed the diverse curriculum, they all expressed feeling rushed to do what they needed to do. They expressed some feelings of worry and frustration that focused on the very busy and dynamic schedule at Colson.

Whether the children were talking about moving from class to class or trying to complete assignments on time, they all expressed feeling pressure over having too much to do and too little time in which to do it:

Our schedule has had a lot of changes made over the years, a lot of changes.

Sometimes I wish it could be, well, I mean, I wish it could be slower instead

of all you have to do here. You have to go here and you have to go there. If there could just be some time, like five minutes so we can get all our stuff together because it's really hard. You're going in there grabbing your journal or something and then it gets lost! That's how most things get lost between classes. (Sola, photo interview)

In the experience of these children, reflection and contemplation were valuable activities in which to participate. The overcrowded nature of their day however allowed them little time in which to engage in these activities:

I'd like to have more time like to write and stuff, like to think. Now that the class is smaller it's more quieter but we still need quiet time because that's like, that's hard to do. (Soza, protocol interview)

By keeping busy, students were able to experience more. But in the school lives of these children, time to reflect on what they had learned was scarce and the hectic school day left little space for their own reflection and meditation.

### *Orderliness and Feelings*

Orderly and secure school environments set the stage for students to perform at their academic, social and emotional best. The physical setting in which learning takes place impacts the way teachers teach and students learn. The school environment impacts how the inhabitants of that place feel about themselves and

others. The orderliness of a school in this study refers to its physical features as well as to how students relate to each other and to school staff.

One of the challenges faced by educators who develop alternative learning environments is that of location. Finding a building in which to house a new school is difficult. In some situations new programs may share a campus with an existing school. In other cases, new schools may be housed in old buildings vacated for various reasons.

Such was the case with Colson School. The founders of Colson believed that providing children with a beautiful and aesthetically pleasing environment was part of demonstrating their care, respect and concern for them as well as providing a pleasing place to learn and work. Because building space was scarce the school settled in to a building that had been scheduled for demolition. Soon after, another school moved into the adjacent building, severely restricting space previously utilized by Colson.

Staff and families made cosmetic improvements both inside and out and turned the building into a peaceful and tranquil setting. Still, there were many troublesome conditions that were disconcerting to the staff. Those concerns also surfaced in the responses of the children. For example, poorly functioning bathroom equipment discouraged some of the children from consistently engaging in healthy habits such as hand washing:



When I was in first grade I went to the bathroom and I washed my hands. The water instead of going down went straight out at my shirt! That wasn't fun to sit there in a soaking shirt. And it kind of scared me to go in there after that. (Soge, photo interview)

Ongoing issues such as the lack of warm water inspired in one child a solution to the problem:

Well, there's no hot water but some of the guys and me developed this thing that if you kick one part of the sink, it will give you hot water. We also found that none of the stalls lock but if you lift them up and push them forward they'll lock into place and then you lift them off again and pull them out. (Soda, photo interview)

Student ingenuity such as this did elicit mild disapproval, though tinged with admiration for their resourcefulness, from the adults at the school. The child expressed moderate confusion regarding the adult reactions. In the opinion of this child, it was the same adults who voiced disapproval of his solutions that had encouraged him to be a creative and inventive thinker at school.

Students at Colson School were guided through conflict resolution strategies from an early age. Still, one child reported that peace and order could be maintained at the school only through the intervention of adults:

You know, if I would go to Mr. X and say that so and so is doing this to me, he will not just ignore it and wait for a month. Mr. X will get it solved like in the afternoon and I think that's good. I think if he didn't do that, things would

just fall apart. (Soge, protocol interview)

The Colson School building is limited in terms of space for break out areas for pods and content areas such as art. The children were enthusiastic about these content areas but found the space at school inadequate in terms of appropriate space to work:

Well, in musical theater we had to wait till the last minute to get on the stage because it doesn't belong to us all the time. We couldn't leave our stuff there so we had to carry it back and forth. Once, the stage had the paint peeled off the walls. (Sola, photo interview)

The staff at Colson School believed that the school was a symbol of commitment to education that could inspire children to be their best and to remember their school life with affection. Memories of school life may last a very long time and have a lasting effect. If this is so, then it is reasonable to suggest that those places in which children spend so much time, be designed and maintained in such a way that supports joyful learning, inspires great teaching, and enhances feelings of security.

### *Epoch and Participant Responses*

This section of the chapter describes the process by which those items held in epoch to this point were allowed to integrate with the data provided by the participants. The purpose for integration was to bring together the interview responses of the participants with those of the researcher in an effort to advance a set of ideas that eventually emerged as a statement of interpretation for the study.

Prior to the collection of participant data, I engaged in the process of epoch, which is described in Chapter 3. I analyzed the epoch in the same way that I analyzed the participant interview transcripts.

A comparison of the two sets of responses illustrated the similarities and the differences between my school experiences and those of the children in this study. Both sets of data produced similar general themes. With the exception of Time, both the participant data and my epoch produced themes of Learning, Feelings, and Relationships.

Although some aspects of public education have changed, many features have remained the same. In the 1950s when I went to school, schools were running headlong in to societal issues that affected education. Issues such as race and threats of war were not unlike some of the current societal issues that impact education today.

In this section of this chapter the school experiences of the children and my experience of school in the 1950s were compared and contrasted. The integration of the data from epoch and those of the children continued the process of analysis.

*Learning: Participant and Researcher*

Within the theme of learning, the children and I had similar experiences when it came to general feelings about school. As illustrated in Table 13, both the children and I enjoyed school and looked forward to being with our teachers. We were both clear about what subjects we enjoyed and which were less enjoyable. Several of the responses in Table 13 having to do with a particular content area were also similar. For example, music was important to both Soza and me while math was difficult for both Sola and for me. I cannot remember a time in elementary school when I did not want to go to school. This is similar to what I heard from several of the children in this study.

Similar to descriptions given by the children, I do not remember negative experiences that may have discouraged me from coming to school:

I loved school! I loved being there. I loved the things we. I loved using the colorful materials and the new books. I also loved the smell and the feel of the school. I think I can still smell that school smell sometimes. (Researcher, epoch)

An area in which there was quite a difference in terms of learning situations was within the sub theme of choice. The children had many opportunities for choice within the curriculum and in the school day. Indeed, they were quite cognizant of these opportunities and were able to articulate their preferences for those classes that offered diverse learning opportunities.

Table 13

*Learning: Researcher and Participant*

Researcher Response	Participant
"I think one of the things I loved the most about school was music"	"I like music a lot, I don't know why. (Soza, protocol interview)
"Math was always difficult for me."	"Math would be easier for me to learn if it was in a game I think." (Sola, photo interview)
"I loved everything about school."	
"One of the things I remember most vividly was a play we did"	"I like going to school and seeing my teachers and my friends" (Soge, photo interview)

Based on my responses, varied choices having to do with curriculum were uncommon in my school experience. I am sure that day to day choices such as decisions about what to choose for lunch were a regular occurrence. But I do not remember a time when I had a choice about what I might want to learn. Further, I do

not believe that any expectation on my part of having anything to say about what I was learning entered my experience.

The absence of choice in my memory of school is not so surprising. The conceptual design of Colson School included as one of its features the concept of choice; options for parents in terms of school environment for their children and choices for children as part of the curriculum.

Based on the history of American public education, there have been alternative school programs that have run parallel with the traditional model of education. I believe that there were alternative programs that probably offered more choice when I attended school. But my school was located in a conservative Los Angeles suburb filled with immigrant families. Our teachers were just beginning to feel the challenges of teaching children who spoke languages other than English. I suspect that their energies were less focused on school reform and more so on making school a positive and productive learning experience for the children in their care.

*Learning and Feelings: Participant and Researcher*

The role of feelings in school has not changed. Children are children and they crave love and affection from the adults in their lives. Both the children and I described in Table 14 many positive feelings in terms of our learning, but there were also occasional feelings of discomfort and embarrassment.

For me, those feelings of anxiety and discomfort were caused by my own perception of my capabilities in math. I do not remember being teased by my schoolmates or unkindly treated by a teacher for my inability to understand subtraction or for any other reason:

I remember feeling confused and burning hot when the teacher would call on me to answer a math problem or go up to work a problem. I was one of those quiet kids that didn't want to draw attention to myself. Plus, if it was math, I probably didn't know what I was doing. (Researcher, epoch)

Table 14

Learning and Feelings: Researcher and Participant	
Researcher Response	Participant Response
"I felt loved."	"It's important that my teachers care for me." (Sofe, protocol interview)
"I always felt safe."	"People care for you here." (Soda, photo interview)
"I didn't like to raise my hand."	"We do things together all the time." (Sofe, protocol interview)

For example, Soge described feeling such anxiety in math that when she was asked to respond to a particular task, she was unable to think clearly enough to answer even though she knew the material. This episode was almost identical to one that I experienced and never forgot. For the children and me, areas such as music and art inspired in us feelings of happiness and a sense of accomplishment and success.

*Relationships: Researcher and Participant*

Another theme that appeared in both the children's responses and the epoch was that of the relationship theme. Table 15 illustrates the differences between my school relationships and those of the children in the study. The primary difference between my responses and those of the children had to do with the importance placed on the peer relationships. In my experience, the relationships with my teachers were more important to me than those of the other students.



Table 15

*Relationships: Researcher and Participant*

Researcher Response	Participant Response
“Other things more important than kids”	“Some kids I’d rather not see.” (Sola, photo interview)
“I didn’t have a lot of friends.”	“Be kind to everyone.” (Sola, photo interview)
“Teachers were always kind.”	“My friends are important.” (Soda, photo interview)

Both the children in the study and I had similar experiences in terms of our school relationships. They described having contact with many loving adults over the course of the school day. All of the children had several teachers with whom they had classes. The principal and others, such as the custodian, were considered to be trusted friends to whom the children could turn with personal and school concerns.

In my experience, adults were just as loving, but contact with them was mostly limited to my classroom teacher. I do not remember ever seeing the principal except at school assemblies. The thought of going to see that, in my perception, very stern woman, struck fear into my heart and it was the goal of every child that I knew to avoid at all costs, a visit to her office.

*Relationships and Feelings: Researcher and Participant*

In my experiences, peer relationships and the feelings that surrounded those relationships were somewhat different than those of the children. Table 16 illustrates those differences.

Table 16

*Relationships and Feelings*

Researcher Responses	Participant Responses
<p>“I didn’t like them all the time and they didn’t like me.”</p> <p>“I looked more to adults for care and support rather than to other kids”</p>	<p>“I knew I could count on my friends.” (Soge, protocol interview)</p> <p>“We’ll be in touch for a long time.” (Soza, photo interview)</p> <p>“My friends pull me through.”(Soda, photo interview)</p>

For the children in this study, friends were a source of support, comfort and care. Friends were important to me as well, but I do not recall the feelings of care and acceptance that seemed to be a foundation of their peer relationships. For Sofe, the encouragement of her friends opened new doors for her in terms of learning experiences:

I started marimba this year. I didn’t really want to do it last year; it didn’t come as an interest and I didn’t think I would be very good at it. But after my friends started, they talked me into it and telling

me how fun it would be like and how they would like help if I needed it. (Sofe, photo interview)

There may be several reasons for this variation in the depth of feeling found in my relationships and those of the children:

I did want to have friends, what kid doesn't? But I didn't expect a lot because I was never sure if they were going to be my friends the following day. (Researcher, epoch)

During my elementary school years, children played together as children do. Once school had ended for the day however, I did not see my school friends again until I returned to school. The people that gave me support and with whom I had deep and caring relationships were my sisters and other family members. I do not remember ever visiting schoolmates at their homes. Nor do I remember my friends from school coming to my house to play. After school activities such as sports, were not available at that time. This is not to say that I did not have playmates from my neighborhood. I remember spending many hours after school and on weekends riding bikes on the sidewalks in front of our homes. But the relationships that I developed at school as a child seemed to me more superficial than those of the children in the study.

By contrast, the children in this study spent much time with each other outside of school. Some of them participated in the same sports teams. Others

attended the same church. In these situations, support and comfort as well as cooperation and mutual aid were a natural part of the context in which the children were spending their time. It was under circumstances such as these that the strong bonds of friendship and unity described by the children in this study were forged.

Another possible reason for the level of feelings and commitment surrounding the relationships of the participants at Colson School may have been due to the emphasis placed on peaceful resolution to problems. From a very early age, children at Colson School were guided through strategies for finding diplomatic solutions to a problem. Even though the findings in this study revealed that the children depended on adult intervention in times of conflict, I would suggest that the adults were not involved in every issue that may arise among the students.

Finally, perhaps the feelings associated with the children's relationships were because of the character of the children themselves. It may be that irrespective of where these children went to school, Colson or someplace else, these features of their relationships would be the same. Even though children spend so much time with school staff, we cannot look into their hearts and minds and really know who they are as people.

*Absence of Time and Orderliness*

The absence of the themes, time and orderliness, in my data set were not surprising. In my experience, the school day was a leisurely exploration of what I considered to be a most interesting variety of topics, both challenging and inspiring. In contrast, the children in this study described finding themselves rushing through a whirlwind of activities within a strictly time-controlled schedule.

In my school experience orderliness and the condition of the schools was never an issue; that may be the reason that it did not appear in the epoch. I do not recall noticing faulty equipment or neglected areas of the school throughout my school career as did the children in this study.

One of the things that I may have taken for granted was the sense of order that I perceived the school to have. I felt safe and secure. The only thing that I remember that was somewhat alarming was the practice of “duck and cover” drills. At the verbal signal from our teacher, we would drop to the floor under our desks and hold onto a table leg. These exercises were meant to save us in the event of a nuclear holocaust. Drills such as these were similar to fire and earthquake drills that the children in this study experienced once per month at Colson. The “duck and cover” drills hinted at disaster that might occur but that disaster was not concrete in my thinking at that age. Their lack of authenticity did not make an impression on me and that may be the reason that they did not surface in the epoch.

### *Importance of Epoch*

I found that keeping my personal views and experiences separate from data collection more challenging than I had anticipated. I think that there were several reasons for this. I was answering questions in retrospect as were the children but my school experiences happened a long time ago.

Also I found that my role as a teacher sometimes got in the way of my thinking about school. The effort to keep that voice quiet and still was the most challenging thing of all.

Many of the responses I gave were similar to those of the children. However, I went to school during the economic prosperity of the 1950s. The idea of alternative learning situations had not yet reached the community in which I lived, so my school followed the familiar factory-model of teaching and learning familiar to many. It is not surprising that my responses differed at least somewhat from those of the children I interviewed.

Creating the epoch was an important process for me. It allowed the voices of the children to emerge in an authentic way. Through this process I was able to come to an understanding of the meaning attached to the experiences of the participants.

The comparisons of participants and researcher data regarding their school experiences drew some similarities but also some distinct differences. Perhaps the most striking similarity was the way that feelings were woven into the experiences of both researcher and participant.

The comparisons of participants and researcher data regarding their school experiences drew some similarities but also some distinct differences. Perhaps the most striking similarity was the way that feelings were woven into the experiences of both researcher and participant.

Educators and others are working hard to make school better for all children by learning about effective practice and interesting and stimulating curriculum. Yet what emerged as central in both the experiences of children in an alternative program and a child who experienced school in a traditional setting long ago was how they felt in various educational situations.

Based on the findings and analysis of the study, the emotional well being of children in terms of their feelings about school played a major role in their school experiences. Further, the role of feelings and emotions in the learning experience of these children and the researcher may have played as important a role as that of efficient instruction and relevant curriculum.

The final chapter of the dissertation will discuss the relationship of the academic research to the findings in this study. Following this discussion will be a reflection on the research process and recommendations for possible further research. Finally, implications for practice at Colson School and possibly for the broader educational community will bring the study to a close.

## CHAPTER VI

### Discussion

The research question for this study was this: How do children perceive and describe their experiences at a particular school? Though a single study cannot provide a description of the school experiences for all students, this study suggests that for these children, their experiences are intertwined with feelings and emotions that weave themselves into every facet of the school day. The student perspectives highlighted here spoke of many instances in which their emotions played a significant role in their learning, their relationships with peers and teachers, and their perceptions about school.

#### *Relationship to Research*

Research has shown that in addition to having sound academic programs and competent teachers, effective schools engage students as active partners in creating school cultures that promote caring, trust, and responsibility (see, for example, Dahl, 1995; Heshusius, 1995; Gardner, 1991; Jensen, 1998). For some schools however, the adoption of a narrow curriculum focused exclusively on the mastery of cognitive skills may exclude programs, classroom strategies, and activities specifically intended to promote the development and refinement of emotional and social skills as well as cognitive skills (see, for example, Cook-Sather, 2002).



I would suggest that, based on the results of this study and those of previous studies children do not separate their feelings and emotions from their school experiences, irrespective of their ages or the type of school environment in which they find themselves, that is, a traditional model of education or an alternative program.

The many studies (Cook-Sather & Shultz, 2001; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Corbett & Wilson, 1995) examined for this dissertation focused on the experiences of middle school and high school students. Despite the differences in the ages of participants however, many of the previous research findings are similar to those of this study. I believe that this is significant. The children who participated in this study were of a different age and grade than those in the studies cited in this dissertation. They also attended a non traditional public school. Yet the influence of feelings on school experiences played as noteworthy a role for elementary age children as it did for middle and high school students.

Finally, similar to the results of this study, previous studies have concluded that students want teachers who they can trust and who care about them (see, for example, Corbett & Wilson, 1995 and Mitra, 2003).

#### *Reflection on Research Process*

The process of conducting and analyzing research went smoothly and became quite an enjoyable process. I enjoyed interacting with the children in a different way

other than as a teacher. Based on their candor, my sense was that they were not concerned with the fact that I was a teacher at the school. They were not worried about including me in some of their conversations about their positive and negative experiences at Colson School.

I was not surprised when I noted that the majority of quotes were taken from the photo interviews. I found that the children gave rich descriptions of their school experiences because of the photographs they had taken. In some cases the photo served simply as a platform for conversation that had little to do with the picture but focused on other school experiences. The information gathered using the interview guide was helpful in helping the children understand about the research process, and it did generate some important information. I would certainly use this method again in future studies.

A major challenge for me came during the analysis process. Since the goal of this study was to feature the voices of children, I found it difficult to decide how much of the transcripts I should use as part of the analytical process. This was similar to the tension felt by Penny Oldfather in her work with student researchers (see Oldfather, 1995). As a way to represent the voices of the children in the most equitable way, my first impulse was to use as much text as possible, but that proved to be unrealistic. I found that using exemplary transcript segments and long, descriptive quotes was a fair way to highlight the voices of the children while still

presenting the findings. I believe that, because of this experience, other studies that I may choose to pursue will be less challenging in terms of working with the data.

The voice recognition software that I used, Dragon's NaturallySpeaking was quite a useful tool. I believe that the use of the software minimized the transcription time by quite some time.

The phenomenological method proved appropriate and useful as a means of helping me to gain insight into the experiences of children as they navigate their days at Colson School. As a result of conducting this research, I have gained a new level of understanding about what children experience while in school.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

Though educators, researchers and policy makers have noticed the importance of including the perspectives of children and are using this important resource in their work, additional research that features these voices of children seems needed. For example, including children in the work of school reform seems a natural thing to do. The notion of realigning or restructuring an entire educational system or an individual school without consulting those it is to benefit and serve seems to me now fundamentally imprudent. Might educational reform efforts enjoy longer sustainability if children are involved throughout the entire process?

As noted above it seems clear that children have similar experiences in school despite the methods, or philosophy embraced by their school. If this is true, then it appears that the debate about best school practice should include how educators and

other caring adults can best incorporate the feelings of children into all they do. Might attending to the feelings and emotions of children benefit their learning experiences as much as the implementation of school reform efforts such as alternative learning environments?

In the future, I would like to conduct another study with younger children, perhaps second or third graders or even younger, as the participants. For this research I would like to again ask the children to describe their school experiences. I am interested in knowing how society and institutions such as school might influence their experiences as they go through the educational system. Would their perceptions and feelings be similar to those of older students, or does something change for them the longer they are in school?

#### *Implications for Practice*

I believe this study has changed the way I have gone about my work with children. I have always felt that, as a teacher and as a mother, children need tenderness and sensitivity even in those trying moments when those who care for them are less open to show them that tenderness. Now, hearing the poignant stories of the children during these interviews, I will pay a great deal more attention to the way I interact with them and take careful note of the way children are feeling at school.

One way that I will do this is to slow down the pace of activity in my classroom. Upon reflection of my practice during this study, I realized that I was beginning to add more and more activities into the day rather than retiring some and replacing them with new things for the children to do. I realize that I must be cognizant of falling into the idea that “more is better”.

Another change in my work with children will be to build into the day more relaxing routines as a way create a safe and predictable environment. I will do this by lengthening the rest time for children after recess and lunch and by incorporating those routines into the many transitions throughout the day.

I was surprised to find out that the children did not see a coherent method of instruction among the teachers at Colson School. Based on their responses their classroom experiences were that teaching strategies varied depending on the teacher. I believe that an important goal of mine after this research is to clarify my own teaching methods and then figure out a way to make those methods more consistent in terms of my instruction. I believe that the staff at Colson will find this particular finding as interesting and surprising as I did.

The staff at Colson School enjoys a certain level of autonomy in terms of school policy and practice. As one of the last remaining founders still teaching at the school, I feel a profound sense of responsibility in terms of improving and sustaining the educational program there. This study will help the staff and me to review

current policy and practice and make changes that will honor the work of the children in this study.

I think perhaps the biggest change at Colson School will be the realization by the staff of how powerful the insights of children can be. I believe that this study will help all of the teachers and staff at Colson, listen more closely and respond more authentically to the children in their care.

There are conflicting views about the role of feelings and emotions in schools. Educators and others are generally able to agree though, that the increasing emphasis in the workplace on cooperation and self motivation has put additional pressure on the schools to prepare students who see themselves as the kind of people who are competent, responsible and caring. For some schools however, that preparation is not focused on social and emotional skill building but on cognitive proficiency as a means to high achievement on mandated measures of accountability.

If feelings and emotions play such a significant role in the school experiences of children as they have articulated in this study, then it is up to educators and other adults to listen and respond. This is not to say that another packaged curriculum focused on affect or emotions is the way to accomplish this.. But education can no longer focus entirely on cognitive aspects of learning that expect all students to meet a certain standardized norm or intelligence. Based on the results of this study, I believe that cognition and feelings are not separate from each other. Learning takes place when children feel genuinely cared for.

Listening and responding to children in an unhurried and authentic way will not be an easy thing because stress, alienation and the intensification of teacher's work are at an all time high. Many educators are working in isolation and feeling increasingly frustrated and burned out with imposed curriculum and mandated guidelines. Teachers everywhere are under pressure to meet federal accountability demands that diminish the possibility of what students in this study found significant about their school experiences: caring teachers, relevant content, and meaningful relationships with adults and peers.

Educators through the years have worked hard to put into place high quality educational programs that meet the academic, emotional and social needs of all children. These efforts are important and they are well worth achieving and documenting but they remain the alternative rather than the norm.

I believe that schools that develop relationships and trust as part of the school culture can promote autonomy and sustain long lasting change, even in the midst of top down district and government control. However, transformative and continued change begins with sound educational policy. Those who control the policies and politics of education speak in the jargon of reform. They would have the American public believe that competent test scores make for better students and that genuine reforms have been achieved. What this indicates however is that today in the name of accountability and standards, the bulk of educational policy continues to move toward an inflexible and narrow mechanized approach to teaching and learning while

the voices and the views of children get lost in the shuffle of so-called school change.

Schools both reflect and influence our society. This is evident in the familiar ebb and flow of interest in the development of progressive, child-centered educational programs over the past several decades. In the early 1950's and early 1960's there was little public interest expressed in these programs because of the Sputnik confrontation. From the middle 1960's through the early 1970's there was a major emphasis in public schools on equity and equal opportunity in American public education.

Today interest in progressive and developmentally appropriate education is again on the rise in response to the current standards movement . If past history can be used as a predictor of educational trends, then I believe that within the next few years progressive and child centered notions of learning will once again begin to emerge in schools and classrooms across America.

A final goal of this study was to add to the body of literature in education as a way to help educators, researchers and other caring adults understand the complexities of school life for children. I believe that focusing on elementary children will add to the studies already available that focus on that age group. As education moves toward an era of progressive ideas and practices, educators and others may then look to this study as a way to offer them possible insights into the



school lives of children; insights that will help them place children at the center of the learning experience where they belong.

Children have ideas about how school should be. Their perspectives, ideas, and beliefs have been vastly underutilized. In a caring and nurturing environment where their voices will be heard and respected, children become part of a learning process that will help them to develop a sense of responsibility, caring, feelings of connection and competence.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and pioneer in the study of child intelligence wrote that the goal of education was to create people capable of doing new and inventive things rather than repeating what other generations had done. If we look forward to a generation of creative and inventive thinkers, then we must pay attention now and listen well to what is most important-the hopes and dreams of the children themselves.

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**Appendix A**

**Interview Protocol**

### **Interview Protocol**

**Project: Perspective on an Arts Magnet School: The Voices of Elementary School Children**

**Time of interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer: Denise Robles-Torres**

**Interviewee:**

**Position of Interviewee:**

**This phenomenological study will explore, through interview, photographs and student written narratives, the lived school experiences of children in a small arts-based magnet school in the Pacific Northwest.**

### **Questions**

- 1. What are your favorite school activities?**
- 2. What are your least favorite school activities?**
- 3. What do you think is the most meaningful thing about school?**

**4. What do you think is the least meaningful thing about school?**

**5. How do you feel about school?**

**6. How might you change school if you could?**

**Thank each child for participating in the interview. Assure him/her of confidentiality of responses and remind him/her of future interviews.**

**Appendix B**

**Consent Forms**





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 Graduate School of Education  
 Portland State University

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 Portland, Oregon 97227

602 Education  
 615 SW Harrison

Phone: 503.255.4100

Fax: 503.255.2311

Web: [www.ed.pdx.edu](http://www.ed.pdx.edu)

**Título del Estudio: Perspectivas de una Escuela Magnet de Artes:  
 Las voces de los niños**

Nombre del niño: \_\_\_\_\_

Tus padres te han dado permiso para participar en un proyecto sobre tus experiencias en la escuela. Si decides participar, te reunirás para hablar con la Sra. Torres sobre tus experiencias escolares. Te reunirás con ella para tres entrevistas de aproximadamente media hora de duración. Las entrevistas tendrán lugar durante el mes de octubre y noviembre del año escolar. Si quieres participar en el estudio, te reunirás con la Sra. Torres la escuela de Sojourner o en tu casa.

Si quieres descansar o dejar de participar en el estudio por completo, simplemente dímelo y no habrá ningún problema! De hecho, no tienes que participar a no ser que quieras. Simplemente di que no. Si tienes preguntas sobre lo que estarás haciendo, pregúntame y te lo explicaré.

Si decides participar, porfavor firma tu nombre en la línea a continuación y recuerda que puedes parar a descansar en cualquier momento, y si decides dejar de participar, simplemente déjame saber.

Firma \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha \_\_\_\_\_



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 Graduate School Education  
 Portland State University

1000 NE Oregon Street  
 Portland, Oregon 97232  
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 503.477.1001  
 503.477.1002  
 503.477.1003  
 503.477.1004

**Título del Estudio: Perspectivas de una Escuela Magnet de Artes:  
 Las voces de los niños**

Su hijo está invitado a participar en un estudio dirigido por Denise Robles-Torres de Portland State University, del departamento de Curriculum e Instrucción. El investigador espera poder comprender y utilizar los conocimientos y las perspectivas de los niños como una manera para que los adultos puedan reexaminar las suposiciones fundamentales sobre la naturaleza del saber, el proceso de llegar a saber y el papel de los estudiantes en la educación. Este estudio es un requisito parcial de su doctorado y está bajo la supervisión de la Dra. Emily Delacruz de Portland State University.

Si su hijo participa en este estudio, se pedirá que el/ella participen en una serie de tres entrevistas semi estructuradas de media hora de duración. Las entrevistas tendrán lugar en la escuela de Sojourner o bien en su casa, durante tres semanas con casi una semana de intervalo entre cada una a finales de octubre o noviembre. Las entrevistas serán grabadas. La participación de su hijo en este estudio puede que represente menos tiempo para el/ella en casa o con amigos. El investigador fijará las fechas para las entrevistas tomando en cuenta fechas importantes para su hijo debido a acontecimientos especiales en su vida. El estado de Oregon requiere que cualquier caso o sospecha de abuso infantil sea reportado a las autoridades. Si su hijo reporta una situación sospechosa, el investigador tendrá que contactar a las personas adecuadas. Su hijo recibirá un pequeño obsequio como simbolo de agradecimiento por su participación en el proyecto. Se espera que este estudio ayude a niños y a los adultos que trabajen con ellos en el futuro.

Cualquier información obtenida en conexión con el estudio que pueda identificar a su hijo sera confidencial. Todos los sujetos seran identificados con un pseudonimo. Transcripciones, notas, y grabaciones de audio cassette seran mantenidas bajo llave en un sitio específico.

La participación de su hijo es voluntaria. El/ella no tiene que participar en el estudio si no lo desea. No habrá repercussion de ningun tipo tanto si participe o no participe en el proyecto. Su hijo también podrá dejar de participar en cualquier momento durante el transcurso del proyecto si así lo desea.

Si tiene dudas o preguntas sobre la participación de su hijo o los derechos del sujeto, no dude en contactar al Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, (503) 725-4288. Si tiene preguntas sobre el estudio en si mismo, contacte a Denise Robles-Torres, 11891 SE Clover Lane, Portland, Oregon, (503) 774-7396.

Al firmar este documento, usted está indicando que ha leído y comprende la información mencionada anteriormente y da su permiso para que su hijo participe en el estudio. Porfavor comprenda que puede retirar su consentimiento en cualquier momento durante el estudio sin penalidad de ningún tipo, y que al firmar, no está waiving ninguna reclamación legal, derechos o remedies. El buscador le proveerá con una copia de este documento para sus archivos.

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Firma del padre o tutor legal	Nombre del niño	Fecha
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 3100 SE Salmon Street  
 Portland, OR 97202  
 Phone: 503.725.4000  
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 Email: [curriculum@psu.edu](mailto:curriculum@psu.edu)  
 Website: [www.psu.edu/curriculum](http://www.psu.edu/curriculum)

**Título del Estudio: Perspectivas de una Escuela Magnet de Artes:  
 Las voces de los niños**

Estimado o Estimada

Mi nombre es Denise Robles-Torres, soy una estudiante y miembro de la facultad de Portland State University. Estoy comenzando un estudio sobre las perspectivas de los niños sobre la escuela y me gustaría invitarle a su hijo/a a participar.

Se ha pedido la participación de su hijo debido a la inmersión cultural de su escuela. No hay mejor manera de encontrar información sobre ciertas experiencias queiendo directamente a las personas que están involucradas en esas experiencias. Como parte del estudio, estoy interesada en las opiniones y actitudes de su hijo en su vida escolar, y espero que la información obtenida nos ayude a comprender las perspectivas al nivel de los niños sobre la escuela en sus propias palabras. Si su hijo decide participar, se le pedirá que conteste durante las tres entrevistas una serie de preguntas sobre las perspectivas de la escuela durante las tres entrevistas. Las entrevistas tendrán lugar en la escuela de Sojourner. Las entrevistas serán de media hora de duración y tendrán lugar en octubre y noviembre. Su hijo podrá elegir su desea hacer las entrevistas en casa o bien en la escuela. Las citas para las entrevistas tendrán lugar una semana aparte la una de la otra y se tendrán en cuenta vacaciones u otros planes familiars a la hora de fijar las fechas de las entrevistas.

Puede que al participar en este estudio, su hijo pierda la ocasion de participar en ciertas actividades de juego con sus amigos pero le aseguro que las fechas se fijarán teniendo siempre en cuenta actividades anteriormente planeadas. Se espera que este estudio ayude a niños y a los adultos que trabajen con ellos en el futuro.

Cualquier información obtenida en conexión con el estudio y que pueda identificar a su hijo será confidencial. Todos los sujetos serán identificados con un pseudónimo. Transcripciones, notas, y grabaciones de audio cassette serán mantenidas bajo llave en un sitio específico.

La participación es voluntaria. La decisión familiar de participar o no en el proyecto no afectará de ninguna manera su relación con el investigador o con Portland State University. Si su familia decide participar en el estudio, usted puede elegir de dejar de participar en cualquier momento sin ningún tipo de penalidad. Por favor mantenga una copia de esta carta para sus archivos. Si decide participar en el estudio, por favor firme y feche los documentos aquí adjuntos y pida a su hijo(a) de firmar el consentimiento aquí también adjunto.

Si tiene dudas o preguntas sobre la participación de su hijo o los derechos del sujeto, no dude en contactar al Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, (503) 725-4288. Si tiene preguntas sobre el estudio en si mismo, contacte a Denise Robles-Torres, 11891 SE Clover Lane, Portland, Oregon, (503) 774-7396.

Denise Robles-Torres  
Portland State University

# PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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## Title of Study: Perspectives on an Arts Magnet School: The Voices of Elementary School Children

Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Denise Robles-Torres from Portland State University, in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. The researcher hopes to understand and engage the knowledge and perspectives of children as a way for adults to reexamine fundamental assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the processes of coming to know and the roles of students in education. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree and is under the supervision of Dr. Emily Delacruz at Portland State University.

If your child participates in this study, he/she will be asked to engage in a series of three semi-structured interviews, each about twenty to thirty minutes in length. Your child will have a choice about where he/she would like the interviews to be held. The interviews can be conducted in your home or they can be conducted at the school. All three of the interviews will take place in the same location. The interviews will take place over a three week period about one week apart, during the months of October and November. The interviews will be audio taped. While participating in this study, it is possible that your child may miss activities at home or with friends. The researcher will be careful to schedule the interviews so they do not conflict with any special events your child may wish to be a part of. The state of Oregon requires that all suspected or confirmed cases of child and elder abuse must be reported to authorities. Should your child reveal situations such as these, the researcher will make the appropriate contacts. This educational research study may help to increase knowledge about children that may help others in the future.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to your child or identify your child will be kept confidential. This information will be kept confidential by attaching pseudonyms to all participants and coding transcripts, field notes and photographs. The tape recordings, photographs, interview notes, and transcripts will be kept in a designated area under lock and key at the home of the researcher.

Your child's participation is voluntary. He/she does not have to take part in this study. There will be no repercussions whatsoever should you or your child decide not to participate in this project. Your child may also withdraw from this study at any time.

If you have concerns or problems about your child's participation in this study or you or your child's rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288. If you have questions about the study itself contact Denise Robles-Torres at 11891 SE Clover Lane, Portland, Oregon, (503) 774-4396.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to allow your child to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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UNIVERSITY**

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**Title of Study: Perspectives on an Arts Magnet School: The Voices of Elementary School Children**

Dear

My name is Denise Robles-Torres, and I am a student and faculty member at Portland State University. I am beginning a study on children's perspectives about school and would like to invite your child to participate.

Your child is being asked to take part because of his/her immersion in the culture of his/her school. What better way to get information about certain experiences than to go directly to those who are involved in those experiences? As part of the study, I am interested in your child's opinions and attitudes about his/her school life, and hope that the information I collect will help us understand the perspectives of children about school in their own words. If your child decides to participate, he/she will be asked to answer a series of open ended questions about her perspectives on school over three interview periods. Your child will have a choice about where the interviews will be conducted. All three interviews will be conducted at the same location. Your child may choose to be interviewed at home or at school. The interviews will last about twenty to thirty minutes and will be scheduled through October and November. The interviews will be scheduled for about one week apart from each other. The dates can be arranged around your schedule in case you have family plans during the time of the interviews.

As a result of this study, your child may miss some activities with her playmates. However, I assure you that all efforts will be made to schedule the interviews in such a way that they do not interfere with any planned activities. It is hoped that his study will help to increase knowledge that may help other children and the adults who work with them in the future.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be linked to your child or identify your child will be kept confidential. Subject identities will be kept confidential by applying pseudonyms to all participants. Transcripts, notes, photographs, and audio tape recordings will be coded and securely stored in a locked, designated area.

Participation is entirely voluntary. Your family's decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the researcher or with Portland State University in any way. If your family decides to take part in this study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you decide to participate in this study please sign and date the enclosed consent forms. Please ask your child to sign the consent form provided for him/her. Return the signed consent forms in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided for you in this packet.

If you have concerns or problems about your child's participation in this study or your child's rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Denise Robles-Torres at 11891 SE Clover Lane, Portland, Oregon, (503) 774-7396.

Sincerely,

Denise Robles-Torres  
 Portland State University

**PORTLAND STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

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**Title of Study: Perspectives on an Arts Magnet School: The Voices of Elementary School Children**

**Child's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

Your parents have said that it is okay for you to take part in a project about your experiences at school. If you choose to do it, you will be asked to meet and talk with Mrs. Torres about your experiences at your school. You will meet with her three times for about twenty to thirty minutes each time. The interviews will be sometime in October and November. You will have a choice about where the interviews will be conducted.. You can choose to work at your home or you can work at the school in one of the classrooms..

If you want to rest, or stop completely during the interviews, just tell Mrs. Torres-you won't get into any trouble! In fact, if you don't want to do it at all, you don't have to. Just say so. Also, if you have any questions about what you will be doing, just ask Mrs. Torres to explain.

If you do want to try it, please sign your name on the line below-remember you can stop to rest at any time, and if you decide not to take part anymore, just let Mrs. Torres know.

**Signed** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_