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Untold Stories and Silenced Voices: Lives Inside a North Georgia Elementary School

Donna S. Troupe

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UNTOLD STORIES AND SILENCED VOICES:
LIVES INSIDE A NORTH GEORGIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

DONNA S. TROUPE

(Under the direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry into the lived experiences of Southern, white, female teachers who teach their overwhelmingly Southern, white student populations in a rural/suburban North Georgia elementary school. I explore the obstacles and challenges they face as they experience the negative and crippling effects of the policies and practices forced upon them in their teaching and learning environments. Drawing upon the theoretical works of Dyer (1997), McIntosh (2012), Anderson & Collins (2007), Morrison (1992), Jupp (2013), Sleeter (1993, 2003), Smith (1944,1949), and hooks (1992) on race and critical white studies; the works of Apple (2001,2008), McLaren (1998), Foucault (1977), Freire (1970), Ayers (2004, 2006), Giroux (2009, 2010), and Macedo (2006) on critical social justice in education; and Whitlock (2007, 2013), Weiss (2005), Fine (1992, 2005), Villaverde (2008), Tochluk (2010), Miller (1980, 1992), Cobb (2005), Hoelseher (2003), and Walker (1997) on white female identities, Southern identities and cultures, I narrate the lived reality of the challenges and hindrances in teachers'

and students' experiences that perpetuate injustices and inequalities in a public elementary school.

The methodology I utilize in this study is based primarily on school portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In addition, I embrace the works of Schubert and Ayers (1992) on teacher lore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) on narrative inquiry and storytelling, He and Phillion (2008) on personal~passionate~participatory inquiry, along with elements of autobiography and biography (Miller, 2005; Grumet, 1988) and (Barone, 2007; Lather, 1991, Benson & Anderson, 1989, Spring, 2013, Saye, 2002; Smith, 1944). The narratives presented use fictionalized composite characters acting out common, real, autobiographical, and biographical experiences that have been woven into fictional stories representing everyday concerns and challenges observed and expressed by teachers and students. The resulting vignettes purposefully aim to represent the dominant contradictions and constraints that teachers and students at an elementary school, a rarely viewed venue, express from their perspective.

This inquiry illustrates the common threads of injustices, struggles, roadblocks, hindrances, and challenges that block teachers and students from reaching their full potential. Several major meanings have been made out of my inquiry. Since the current climate of the ever-increasing pressure to raise achievement and the demand of standardization in schools depreciates teachers and students and incites their fears, public schools desperately need spaces in which the root causes of these fears are exposed, the negative effects on students and teachers is examined, and a more trusting and encouraging alternative is

created. The hegemony influenced by Southern cultures and values perpetuates a patriarchal structure that affects how the female populations in elementary schools act, how others perceive them, and how they are treated professionally and personally. Those female students and teachers, particularly those who are praised for being good, submissive, and quiet, and who do not dare to question the power structure, are in turn unknowingly pushed to participate in the oppressive injustices that continue in schools today.

Counterstories of elementary teachers and students challenge the dominant narratives of power and hegemony, particularly the stereotypical views of teachers and students experiencing frustrations and injustices perpetuated by current oppressive policies and practices in our schools and societies. It is of paramount importance to create spaces for educators, administrators, policy makers, and the public to listen to the counternarratives from teachers and students, challenge stereotypical images imposed upon them, hear their voices and concerns, feel their struggles and frustrations, and recognize the root causes of narrow, unfair and frustrating policies and practices on the education of our children in schools and societies. Teachers and students, along with parents, the community, administrators, other educators, policy makers, and all others involved in the education of our society, must make a conscientious choice to hear the voices of the oppressed and question the purposes and aims of education for our children in today's schools. They should work together to expose and negate the forces that are currently destroying opportunities for unlimited possibility and freedom for creative potential that all children deserve to experience and fight

back the evil force of standardization and comodification of schooling and create inspiring learning environments where our children have equitable opportunities to reach their highest potential (Siddle Walker, 1996).

INDEX WORDS: School Portraiture, Fictional Narrative, Southern Identity, Critical Southern Studies, Teacher Lore, Curriculum Studies, White Privilege, Southern Female Teachers, Counternarratives

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DEDICATION

To Joseph,

Thank you for learning how to vacuum, clean toilets, do laundry, and generally fend for yourself. I will forever appreciate the sacrifices you made to help me achieve my goal. I love you now more than ever, and eternally. You now have permission to talk again!

To Kathy and Ellen,

Thank you for teaching me how to steer a stubborn luggage cart and how to make a stationary elevator move. I will forever value our pithy conversations on I-75 and I-16.

To my family and friends,

Thank you for your love, prayers, and understanding during all the times I had to say, "I can't. I have to study." It's over! I look forward to many fulfilling days with you A.D.! (After Dissertation!)

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I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Chapman, Dr. James Jupp, and Dr. William Schubert for their willingness to serve on my committee. I greatly appreciate your guidance, feedback, inspiration, and encouragement during this academic endeavor. It was a great honor to work with each of you, and to be in a room with such vast and diverse experience and expertise. You made this academic journey an overwhelmingly awesome experience! I appreciate each one of you.

I would also like to thank Dr. William Reynolds for the respect shown to our cohort during the first eye-opening class in the program. Looking back, I imagine we must have provided much dinner conversation entertainment that semester! Thank you for your respect. I will aspire to follow your example of respect always.

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PROLOGUE

My educational experiences as a student from kindergarten to graduate school, as well as my experiences as a teacher, have been a source of lifelong frustration. Until entering the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, I had no understanding as to how and why I felt this way. One of the first papers I wrote during my first semester in curriculum studies was entitled *Out of Obscurity: A Journey of Intellectual Growth*. This title accurately describes how I felt as I entered my journey into doctoral studies. The further I immersed myself into curriculum studies, and the more familiar I became with the works of many noted scholars and theorists, the more I began to realize why I had such a cynical attitude, and why I continually felt as if I were boxed in and suffocating as a learner, as well as a teacher. I loved the students, I loved learning and teaching, but I despised the system that kept my students and me from reaching infinite horizons. I had determined that authentic learning no longer existed in schools. I began to realize that there were many unjust practices that permeate our public schools in this area of the country, the South, and in the nation. These practices euthanize our schools, students, and teachers into mechanical individuals and institutions with one goal in mind; to produce a uniform student that is capable of passing standardized tests in order to show their value as an educated person. I now have a better understanding of the underlying structures and functions of our educational system and our culture that are at work to cripple those who have a desire to learn. In the writing of my dissertation, I explore these concepts in-

depth, and hope to help others more clearly realize why we are not meeting the needs of our students in public schools. How do political and social forces perpetuate hindrances that keep individuals from developing their full potential as learners and as human beings? How do race, gender, and power intersect with the Southern culture to form a hegemonic society that often places certain individuals in places of power, and perpetually keeps others under the control of that power structure? How do these entities intersect in such an obscure place as an elementary school in rural North Georgia and hinder liberty and justice for all, particularly for select groups of society? Does social justice and equality in education exist in our schools?

Using a mixture of narrative, life stories, fiction, and the methodology of school portraiture, I create a descriptive portrait of the daily lives of teachers and students inside a North Georgia Elementary School. The fictional portrait uses composite characters, and is based on the daily life and experiences occurring inside Taylor Ridge Elementary School (pseudonym). I provide an inside view of what life is like in an elementary school, particularly a school located in the South and surrounded by Southern culture. I hope to expand the conversation surrounding justice in our schools to encompass younger, elementary age students, who are the future foundation of our society, and the teachers who teach them every day as they grow and learn.

My dissertation consists of a prologue and five chapters. The first section of Chapter 1 gives the reader their first glimpse into Taylor Ridge Elementary School and contains an opening vignette describing an event in the classroom

concerning educational standards. In the second and third section, I explore the history of the area and the community where the inquiry into the daily lives of the students and teachers takes place. The last section of this chapter is an overview of my research, explaining the purpose and importance of the inquiry into a North Georgia Elementary School. I give a brief description of my foundational roots and purpose, as well as my methodology, and present the reader with questions I hope they will consider as they read the study.

In Chapter 2, the reader is presented with an opportunity to reflect upon and correlate the challenges presented within the portrait with the identities, conceptions, and perspectives that are reviewed. In the first section, I write of my autobiographical experiences as a lifelong resident of the South Tennessee/North Georgia area, which helps the reader gain a better understanding of my Southern roots and personal perspective. I discuss how identity formation is influenced by Southern culture. The second section explores the Southern woman's role in society, as an individual, and as an educator, and how being a female in the South shapes identities and limits pursuits. The focus in section three is on critical issues in education. The discussion examines the unjust social and cultural practices that are rooted in society, and shows how these practices hinder equal and democratic practices in schools. I investigate the issues of power and hegemony that permeate our public school system, and how those issues manifest themselves in our structure of schooling. The last section in Chapter 2 is an examination of race issues in the Southern culture. White studies help us analyze the patriarchal white monoculture and why it exists, and examines the power of white privilege.

Chapter 3 explains the predominant research methodology approach used for this study. In this chapter, school portraiture, a qualitative methodology developed by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, is defined, and described. The history and development of portraiture from narrative studies is established. I discuss key studies using portraiture methodology, and criticisms of the methodology are weighed. I also discuss ways of collecting, analyzing, and representing narratives using school portraiture.

In Chapter 4, the multifaceted experiences and journeys of teachers' and students' experiences inside the school unfold. Fictional characters share significant occurrences from their lived experiences, including trials, struggles, and successes. The vignettes, which are the heart of the study, connect the reader to the joys and sorrows of the teachers and students inside the school, as they present typical happenings that are common in their day-to-day lives.

In the final chapter, I discuss the significant themes arising from the study, and reflect on five overarching meanings that emerge. I share my interpretations and conclusions, and encourage the reader to question and reflect on their own experiences. It is my intention that readers will acknowledge and listen to the counternarratives of those trapped in gross injustices in elementary schools, critically challenge the misguided purposes and practices in education today, and be inspired to work towards positive changes for our schools and societies.

CHAPTER 1

PORTRAYAL OF TAYLOR RIDGE ELEMENTARY

Our “Standard” Education

The mission of Taylor Ridge Elementary School is to design, construct, and maintain an environment that ensures every student will attain a high level of academic achievement as defined by state and national standards. We commit to a comprehensive system of support by addressing the individual needs of each student. We will work with the school, community, parents, and students to achieve positive outcomes.

This is the mission statement of my school: Taylor Ridge Elementary.

This statement was created with the purpose of representing the goals and outcomes that we, as a faculty and staff, aspire to. It is intended to be the guiding document of all our endeavors as we educate the students that attend Taylor Ridge. Every school in Georgia is required to create such a mission statement that reflects its own aspirations and goals. Every day, the teachers, students, and parents of Taylor Ridge Elementary School enter the double glass doors and pass by this mission statement, which is framed and on display in the main hallway. The administrators and a group of teachers spent days and days after school in meetings collaborating before deciding exactly what it should say, and exactly what wording to use. Another project elevated in importance for a time, and then quickly forgotten about. After all the effort poured into it, I doubt that a handful

of people associated with the school could even tell you what it says. Once again, valuable time wasted creating something, which soon becomes nothing of importance.

On one particular morning, my friend and fellow third grade teacher Andrea did not feel quite up to maintaining an environment in her classroom that would “ensure every student will attain a high level of academic achievement as defined by state and national standards,” as the mission statement says. She was just hoping to make it through the day without falling asleep! It’s hard to be on your “A” game every single day. Some days are just more difficult than others are. The night before, she had been up almost all night with her 2 year old who had a terrible earache. On top of that, the day before had been a disaster at work, and she was not so enthusiastic about going to work today anyway. She would rather have been in bed with an earache herself. The day before, Mr. Stone, the principal, had come in her room on one of his infrequent “pop-in” visits that the state department requires of administrators in public schools. She had just finished a short unit on understanding and using illustrations in a text, one of the common core standards that are required to be taught in third grade, according to the Georgia Department of Education. The curriculum that teachers are required to cover in their classrooms at each grade level is dictated by a set of standards that has been created by the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE). These standards, the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards, or most commonly referred to as the CCGPS, is a set of standards based on a national set of standards called the Common Core Curriculum (CCC). Almost all the states, including the

state of Georgia, have adapted these standards and use them to guide the curriculum at every grade level. The DOE in Georgia has also identified what is referred to as “best practices” for teachers. These are teaching techniques and tools that the GADOE has deemed to be most effective at implementing the required standards. Teachers must use these best practices daily as they teach the standards. Administrators are admonished to assure that the professionals in their building are strictly adhering to the appropriate practices as they teach the appropriate standards. An additional requirement is that the standard currently being taught in every subject must be posted in plain view in the classroom, and students must be familiar with the standard and its meaning.

Andrea had just taken down the corresponding standard she had been teaching from her board minutes before Mr. Stone showed up. As was expected, she felt confident that her students could recite the standard and tell in their own words what it meant, something she made sure of just in case Mr. Stone asked them what standard they were working on while they were at lunch. He had been known to quiz students in this manner quite frequently while they were in the dining room. The posted standard from her latest lesson read as follows:

ELACC3RI7 (English, Language Arts, Common Core Third Grade Reading Standard #17)
Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text.

After checking each student for understanding, and marking which students did not meet, did meet, or exceeded this standard on her constant companion, the profile sheet, (one more of many additional requirements) the students began asking questions about an illustration they had discussed during the course of the lesson. The picture was a three dimensional representation of a family tree, and included actual photos and drawings of the people in the family represented in the illustration. While they were still on the floor in a group, the discussion predictably turned to their own families. This led to conversations about such things as where their family went to eat the night before, the home run they had made at the game last night before dinner, and how someone in their family was hurt yesterday while trying to teach their little sister how to ride a bike. Happy that the lesson invoked some interesting and friendly dialogue between the students, Andrea mentally checked off her short list of requirements:

1. Posted standard. Check!
2. Used best practices. Check!
3. Students capable of reciting standard in “kid friendly” language. Check!
4. All students met or exceeded the standard. Check!

While they were pleasantly chatting, Elizabeth was sorting through the piles on her desk looking for the next lesson’s materials. Unbeknownst to Andrea or the students, Mr. Stone, the principal, was standing at the back of the room observing what Andrea considered a relaxed moment of “organized chaos.” After several minutes going unnoticed, he interrupted, and addressed the class with an authoritative voice.

“Hello, class. What standard is it that you are discussing?”

Marie, one of the aspiring leaders in class who is always ready to give an answer, excitedly piped up.

“We’re not talking about a standard Mr. Stone, we’re having free time!”

Andrea felt like crawling under her desk. This is the last thing she wanted her principal to hear out of one of her student’s mouth! Free time. There is no such thing as free time in school. Every minute, according to the powers that be, should consist of well-planned and executed lessons and assessments. Even recess is no longer sacred.

“Oh, well, can you find that standard posted in your room?” Mr. Stone replied in a cool tone.

The class fell silent. Andrea began speaking,

“Mr. Stone, we were just...” She could tell by his sour expression that whatever explanation she was offering him was falling on deaf ears. By this time, all her students were terrified they were in big trouble for talking, and they all began looking at her as if they had just had their recess taken away for the rest of the year.

“Thank you for letting me visit, Mrs. Brandon. We can talk more after school, ok?”

As soon as he left, she burst into tears. The pressure was just more than she could take. The kids began asking if they were in trouble.

“No,” she replied. “Everything’s fine.” The kids began hugging her and telling her they loved her. After a few minutes, they all got up and meandered to

their own seats. Andrea gained her composure, found the next lesson, and went on with her day as best as she could, dreading the afternoon in Mr. Stone's office.

Who really knows and understands the significance of the critical issues which arise daily in a teacher's classroom? Which sources do the political and public populations trust to make the most important decisions that concern the education of our most valuable resources: our children and young adults? Who is asked to share the most knowledgeable, successful, experienced educational expertise when it is time to begin the processes of forming, shaping, and addressing challenging issues facing the local and national curriculum of the country today? The classroom teacher is certainly not! In asking why this is so, we face a very loaded question.

The everyday inner and outer workings of an elementary school are diverse and complex. No one really understands the intricate balances and shifts of the daily mood and stressors in a school unless they have experienced them first-hand. The purpose of this study is to bring awareness and enlightenment to an audience of readers by giving them an inside glimpse of the daily workings inside a North Georgia Elementary School. It is my intention to create a fictionalized composite portrait of the school in words, with the purpose of providing the reader a descriptive first-hand picture of the daily realities in schools, as opposed to the typically inaccurate and skewed accounts reported by outsiders. This picture of reality is not one the local, state, or national government has created. Nor is it one created by educational marketing moguls or one the popular media or news media has painted, or the public themselves have

imagined, but a real picture of the daily goings-on inside of classrooms and schools; the small, common, seemingly insignificant daily experiences which affect the present and future quality of life for both students and teachers. I intend to paint a portrait of the life-altering significance of those experiences on the lives of the persons involved on a daily basis in public schools. As Philip Jackson (1968/1990) states:

As we remember that each classroom minute is one of millions of similar minutes experienced by millions of persons and by each person millions of times, [we are] led to look closely at the details of the events before us. Considered singly many aspects of classroom life look trivial, and in a sense, they are. It is only when their cumulative occurrence is considered that the realization of their full importance begins to emerge. ... We must not fail to ponder, as we watch, the significance of things that come and go in a twinkling- things like a student's yawn, or a teacher's frown. Such transitory events may contain more information about classroom life than might appear at first glance. (p. 177)

Our daily life experiences tell a very important story. Each of our lives and life events hold great significance. Each student and teacher has a very important story to tell. These stories can be a great catalyst for change; they are capable of moving the universe if told in the right way. With honesty and openness, life events can touch others in monumentally significant ways. In the sharing of these stories, they speak repeatedly to another's, and then another's experience. Within

the sharing of individual stories, the cumulative experience becomes less trivial and more poignant. It is essential that these stories be told.

From Past to Present:

Established 1837/2004

The day is sunny and crisp as I drive down I 75 away from Chattanooga and towards the Georgia line on my way to Taylor Ridge Elementary. I round my exit and spot the familiar off-ramp fast food restaurants, along with several large gas stations, mini marts, a Dollar General Store, and other small hometown restaurants and businesses. I see that the bank has finally cleared the lot and has begun reconstructing its building. The bank, along with the middle school, and many homes and businesses were destroyed either partially or completely by the tornadoes that ripped through the town last spring and changed the landscape, as well as the people in the town forever. The tornadoes left what used to be huge oaks and wooded areas surrounding the small homes and businesses exposed, flattened, and piled with debris. The sight of the devastation was shocking. Although it devastated the residents and left the area impassable for weeks, it could not destroy the determination of this small Southern town to survive and thrive together in the aftermath of the storms. Things are just about back to normal. Since the tornadoes completely demolished most of the middle school, construction crews have been scrambling to have the new one ready enough for students to attend next week when the new school year starts, and many

businesses and individuals have donated a lot of time and money to make it happen. Nothing like a tragedy to cause folks to pull together and help each other pick up the pieces in the aftermath.

The local places dotting the landscape are where some of “my” children’s parents work. I refer to all my past students as “my kids.” Other teachers may call them “her babies,” or “my children.” When you have spent an entire year with a child in such close quarters, they are no longer just a student. They become a part of you and remain yours from then on. Turning south onto the highway, one of the first things I notice is that the small quilting store has put a new sign up with a huge intricate quilting pattern on it, advertising that their store is now open once again. In less than a mile from the bustling exit, the quaint restaurants and small stores disappear. To my left as I drive, ridges full of woodsy terrain rise tall and meander along with me down the straight two-lane highway. On the other side of the ridge is the small city of Dalton, known as the carpet capital of the world. The textile industry, or what is left of it, is a large employer in the area. To my right, large fields are dotted with a hodgepodge of grand homes, smaller homes, and mobile homes. Cows and goats graze around huge round bales of freshly harvested hay. The landscape is spectacularly peaceful and serene. Only a few cars travel along the road with me. At one point, a tractor crossing the road traveling about ten miles an hour delays me on my journey. After driving about 17 miles south down this long stretch of 2-lane country highway, I turn right onto a small, narrow road. Topping a grassy hill, I spot the sprawling, modern looking brick and block school sitting in the middle of a beautiful field of grasses

surrounded with rolling hills. The scenery is breathtaking. I have driven this stretch of highway so many times; I think I could get there with my eyes closed! Approaching the entrance to the school, long sidewalks, large, thick concrete columns, and simple, yet welcoming landscaping is there to greet you. I never tire of the beauty of the surroundings of my home-away-from-home, Taylor Ridge Elementary School. Any visitor coming through what appears to be such a sparsely populated area would no doubt wonder where all the children come from that grace these doors every day.

Taylor Ridge Elementary School was built in 2004 in order to relieve the overcrowded elementary schools that were north of the county closer to the interstate. Just as the other elementary schools in the county, it houses pre-K through 5th grade. Because of phenomenal growth in the surrounding area in the previous decade, the county was labeled as one of the fastest growing in Georgia. An influx of people from north towards Chattanooga, as well as south towards Atlanta resulted in the overcrowding of the schools at the north end of the county, which prompted the building of this school. However, unbeknownst to many, this was not the first Taylor Ridge community school.

Established in the 1850's, this North Georgia County is rich with the history of Creek and Cherokee Indian life, and significant battles of the civil war, which took place nearby. It never fails that when local Georgia history is taught concerning the Creek and Cherokee who lived here, there are always several students that proudly tell the class that they "have Indian blood" in them. After the Civil War, the population here consisted mostly of farmers and merchants.

Since Taylor Ridge was quite a distance from the main town for the era, the residents who built their houses nestled at the base of the ridge were a rather close-knit group of folks, as they are today, helping each other out when times got tough. Serving as a stagecoach station for a season, the town boasted the first post office in the county until it was closed down in 1907. The first one-room Taylor Ridge Schoolhouse was a small, wooden building with an A-line roof. It sat next to the United Methodist Church, which is a stately structure, built out of hand hewn stone that is still in existence across from the Fire Hall. After several decades, the one-room schoolhouse also closed its doors. Taylor Ridge remained a remote, isolated community until the construction of Interstate 75 began in the 1960's. The interstate, replacing Highway 41 as the main route from Chattanooga to Atlanta and points south far beyond, brought much growth to the area. Since most of the growth occurred in the northern part of the county closer to the interstate, the properties nestled in the ridge continued to be a fairly remote and quiet place to live until progress contributed to the large growth spurt in the 1990's, when plans to build the new Taylor Ridge Elementary School were made. Those plans became a reality in 2004, when the new Taylor Ridge Elementary School opened its doors to the community.

Community Ties That Bind...and Divide

Today, many of the same families living here still farm and raise cattle on the land that their parents and grandparents farmed. The elders in the community

love to share stories of the bygone days. You can pretty much bet that those stories will likely include relatives of some of the listeners, since everyone seems to be related to each other in this community. Makes you watch what you say, as you never know if the gossip pertains to a relative or not! Besides the many farms in the area, a few of the inherited parcels of land have been converted into small subdivisions, which are tucked away in the ridges. A couple of small stores and gas stations are now scattered along the main path through the community. There is now a small community center across from the fire station next to the church, where members of the community can be seen walking the track, playing ball, or maybe pushing a stroller. The trailers and small homes seen along the 2-lane highway belong to the local poor and working class families in the area. The parents of the students living here often find temporary or permanent work in the plants servicing the textile industry nearby. Other students who attend Taylor Ridge arrive from the middle class suburban homes scattered in the hills. Many of these students' parents commute to jobs in nearby Chattanooga and the surrounding area. A smaller number of students from Taylor Ridge Elementary are from quite affluent families, and live in very large, stately homes. Parents and relatives dropping their children off in the mornings drive anything from BMW's and Lexus, to lived-in, 10+ year-old dilapidated vans. The divisions between the "haves" and the "have not's" is very apparent in the community, as it is in the school. Currently, about 520 students attend Taylor Ridge Elementary. The area is no longer growing quite so fast anymore. Just fewer than 40% of the students attending the school are eligible for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

Many of the forty-plus teachers at the school live in neighboring communities surrounding the county, or across the Georgia line in the nearby suburbs of Chattanooga, Tennessee. A handful of teachers live, or have moved closer to the school in some of the newly developed subdivisions scattered throughout the area, and are a part of the 4,000+ residents which make up the small Taylor Ridge Community.

This community has always been and remains predominantly white, since the brutal removal of the Native Americans who populated the area in the early 1800's. Confederate pride also runs deep in its roots. The area accommodates an active chapter of The United Daughters of the Confederacy, hosts civil war reenactments, and retains prolific civil war memorabilia available for trade or purchase. An occasional pick-up truck can be seen driving down the country roads with the Confederate flag plastered across the back window, or flying freely in the breeze on a pole mounted to the outside of the cab. Although these displays of racism appear hostile to non-white residents or visitors, there have been no public incidences of racial tension in this particular area in many years. The surrounding counties in Georgia and Tennessee however, do hold active chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, and racism manifests itself in hushed remarks in conversation among many residents of Woodstation and the surrounding area. Surprisingly, one rarely hears racist remarks at Taylor Ridge Elementary. Occasionally, a young first or second grader may make a derogatory comment about those of another race, but other children are quick to show their

disapproval. However, it is still not a very friendly or welcoming atmosphere for newcomers who are not white.

As is common to the Bible belt, Taylor Ridge boasts about 10 different churches within a 5-mile radius. All are exclusively white congregations, except for one church, which is racially mixed. It consists mostly of a very small number of interracial white and black married couples, their children, and extended family members.

Only a scant number (typically much less than 5%) of African American, Asian, Hispanic, or children from any ethnicity other than those of European descent have ever attended the school, or have ever lived in the area. Recently, a black family moved into the area and three of the family's children were enrolled at school, which is quite an unusual event. The first few weeks the children attended Taylor Ridge, you could cut the tension surrounding them with a knife. For a while, the children were only seen with their siblings, divided from the rest of the population. Our teachers and students have very little experience with, and are not used to dealing with anyone they perceive as "different" from themselves. Although virtually no ethnic diversity exists in the school, the students, typically very caring and supportive towards each other, were making friends with the newcomers within a month. Soon, the new students were no longer isolated, but were seen scattered around the building and interspersed with the other students they had made friends with, laughing and joking, and even displaying their singing and dancing talents on the morning announcements delivered via closed circuit TV. It would be interesting to know if the parents were granted the same

acceptance as their children were in their new community, since the family relocated at the end of the school year to another district.

People in the area who attended school here forty or fifty years ago relate similar social and educational traditions and experiences that the students of today experience. The lingering traditions and rituals perpetuated over the years sometimes seem to be insignificant, but our own perceptions of past personal experiences have great influence on our present views. The person I am and the views I hold today are a compilation of my family relationships, social and educational experiences, and the significance of the time and place in which they occurred. The geographical place and historical time is crucial in understanding the “whys” of what is happening now in public education. How has the past formed us, and what have we learned from it? How does that affect our future directions? Although time rambles on, the same ideals remain rooted in each of the generations that come and go through the doors of Taylor Ridge Elementary School.

Slice of a Southern School: A View from Within

Everyone knows what school is like. We have all been there, done that, right? Yes, it has been quite a few years since most adults have attended an educational institution, but parents, the media, and other public sources are quick to project their own image of our schools, and are quick to let us know what kinds of problems exist in our schools today. Things could not have changed that much.

You go in, sit in a desk, learn something, take a test, and go to the next grade, right? These remembered rituals are only a very small part of school. The memories we have of our own personal experiences are only one very small part of the story and our own personal stories of school are the ONLY ones most of us know. A multitude of stories, viewpoints, criticisms, and praises exist and come from individuals involved in schools every day. Those stories are waiting to be told. One person's experiences, both in and out of schooling, affect many others around them. The subsequent stories in this inquiry are written to validate, to weed out false images, and to give a firsthand account of everyday happenings affecting the lives of millions of individuals who attend schools every day. These stories are written in order to create a portrait that will bring intricate details to light that more accurately represent and resemble the reality inside today's burden-laden classrooms. It is my desire that the compilation of stories "connects the personal with the political, the theoretical with the practical, and research with social and educational change" (He and Phillion, 2008, p. 1).

Unless you have walked a mile in another's shoes, you cannot fathom what their lived experience is like. In exploring and creating a fictionalized portrait of the lives inside an elementary school, I hope to illustrate to others the struggles and strengths of students and teachers who live and work together in our schools. It is my desire to dispel inaccurate perceptions, and present an inquiry that will allow others an inside view of what influence yesterday's history and today's policies have on what goes on in the lives of those inside our schools. I want others, such as outsiders, parents, and the public, to gain a better

understanding of schools, and to reflect on first-hand knowledge that may dispel inaccurate depictions and change attitudes. I want them to feel a student's pain, experience a teacher's joy, cry, as well as laugh together with the actors as they walk through the doors and spend time inside Taylor Ridge Elementary, as if they were actually there. I hope to provide a vivid picture of the historically persistent attitudes that hinder individual potential within a small Southern elementary school, and to enhance understanding of the triumphs and tragedies which students and teachers experience inside the walls of schools every day. It is my intention as a participatory researcher to offer the reader an insider's perspective, which will depict a more accurate understanding of the culture and character of the subjects: a voice that paints a canvas of stories to share with those beyond the walls of school. Schubert (1986) says, "Curriculum inquiry should infuse every aspect of life not merely schooling.... For it is the journey of learning in all such areas, including schooling, that shapes the outlook or personal theory of all persons. To neglect consideration of the whole is to miseducate" (p. 51).

Public schools have been and continue to be the scapegoat for all the ills of American culture, American economics, and American politics. Schools are consistently used as a dumping ground of excuses for all the perceived failures of the country. Michael Apple (2001) describes it in this way: "Open season on education continues. The media, candidates for public office, conservative pundits, corporate leaders, nearly everyone it seems, has an opinion on what's wrong with schools" (p. 1). I offer the reader a unique glimpse into the experiences of those who continue to be the target of public scrutiny; those who

work, live, and play in our public schools every day. Of course, the reader will not be able to make broad generalizations from this study, but major themes that have surfaced during the course of this study, will serve to be indicative of other schools with similar historical and cultural traditions. I hope to be one “internal critic,” as Jackson calls for, who can bring to life a portrait of what it is really like to be in the workings of a public school today. Jackson (1968/1990) suggests:

In addition to participant observers, it might be wise to foster the growth of observant participators in our schools- teachers, administrators, and perhaps even students, who have the capacity to step back from their own experiences, view them analytically, and talk about them articulately. It is probable that only a few participants will ever be equipped by either temperament or training to do this job while continuing to perform their regular duties, but considering the size of our teaching population even one out of every ten thousand or so teachers will be sufficient to comprise a salient group of “internal critics” of the teaching process. (p. 175)

As a practitioner and a researcher, I feel a moral obligation to share the work, passion, and pain of my fellow teachers and students with the reader to broaden their perspectives and views.

We supposedly live in a democratic society. We, as a country, claim to value freedom. According to the laws of the land, everyone has an equal voice. Every man, woman, and child is no longer restrained by the color of their skin, their sex, or their financial status in the pursuit of their desires and dreams. It is assumed that all children have the right to a free, equal, and quality education.

“All of these children say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Whether in the New York suburbs, Mississippi, or the South Bronx, they salute the same flag. They place their hands across their hearts and join their voices in a tribute to “one nation indivisible” which promises liberty and justice to all people” (Kozol, 1991, p. 132). Are we truly a nation of liberty and justice for all people? Many in the field of education and curriculum have scrutinized, questioned, and challenged the fairness and equality that describes our democracy. William Ayers (2004) says this as he reflects on the state of education in our nation: “Teacher judgment and wisdom are curtailed, administrators become adjuncts to the police, and schools become narrower, narrower, narrower, until they are nothing more than little training prisons” (p. 25). The result of my research is a reflective journey illustrating the challenges faced by those within a North Georgia elementary school. This fictionalized narrative portrait is based primarily on the school in which I have been employed since its opening, along with autobiographical and biographical accounts of experiences that have occurred in neighboring schools in which my colleagues and I have worked in prior to our current school opening. The study is comprised of reflections of daily life within this fictionalized school. Student and teacher stories have been collected and fictionalized. Journaling was a primary record keeping technique which reflects an inside view of life within this school. In this research, I hope to open a new dimension of portrayal, a deeper understanding for the readers, and promote a more liberatory ideology for the future of our schools. “Truth is always given relative to a conceptual system and the metaphors that structure it. Truth is therefore not absolute or objective but is

based on understanding” (Lakeoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 197). Kozol (1991), Rose (1989), Maran (2000), Jackson (1968/1990), McLaren (1998), Jupp (2013) Willis (1977), Michie (1999/2009), and Meier (1995/2002), to name a few, have written insightful accounts and have increased our understanding of the dynamics of life in our schools, but the overwhelming majority of these insightful narrative portraits are based on the experiences of teachers and students in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. There are very few accounts in current literature of life in schools situated in Southern rural areas. In addition, the current literature also lacks the unique perspective of elementary students and teachers within this particular region.

I hope to bring these rarely exposed and unique perspectives and untold stories of Southern elementary students and teachers to the current literature in the field of curriculum studies, and into the public arena. This study aims to expand the knowledge base for future researchers, and provide a unique image of what really goes on inside one public elementary school in North Georgia. Rather than conducting research in order to obtain a bulleted list of results, this research project will “seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual political theory and change. Researchers critique what seems natural, spin images of what’s possible and engage in the questions of how to move from here to there” (Fine, 1992, p. 220). Nothing is fixed when you are researching lived experiences.

Elementary students and teachers often find themselves in forgotten, neglected, misrepresented, oppressed, and silenced settings and situations. As

intellectuals, public school elementary teachers must take on the responsibility of “Someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma...and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said, 1994, p. 11). As teachers and students, the ongoing daily issues and challenges that we face are often magnified by the social and cultural milieu that surrounds us. I live within the story that I tell, both past and present. This community, and many others like it, needs to awaken to the impact that the current political, social, and power structures have on the lives of teachers and students that affect them, not only daily, but for the rest of their lives. This is a call for an awakening; a change that will upset the current patterns of oppression and powerlessness in the underrepresented populations living their lives in elementary schools. Without an awakening, the current social milieu will continue to reproduce and perpetuate the oppressive conditions of the present.

CHAPTER 2

PORTRAYAL OF THEORIES

GRITS: Where I Come From

GRITS; Girls Raised in the South. An acronym that represents the Southern culture, traditions, and mannerisms of women who have been raised in “God’s Country.” The phrase signifies a sense of Southern pride and sorority among women from the South. My identity IS that of a girl raised in the South, and all that which it encompasses. “A concept of place brings the particularistic into focus by linking the understanding of the individual to the social forces that flow through him or her. Place embodies the social and the particular” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 37). The South is the only thing I know. Both my parents and all my relatives are also from the Deep South. The ethical and moral standards I was raised in come from my parents, who were raised smack dab in the middle of controversial race issues in Mississippi and Alabama where they grew up. Reta Ugena Whitlock states that we “...are who we are in large part because of where we are; we are shaped by place; we believe, behave, speak and desire in place; we interact with each other in place” (2007, p. 44). The South has shaped who I have become.

My mother was one of six children raised in the Mississippi Delta, where my grandfather was a sharecropper. She and her siblings spent their summers working in the cotton fields, and would miss school in the fall until all the crops were harvested. They would wear long sleeves and hats in the hot summer sun as

they worked, so their skin would remain lily white; their skin color being the only thing which separated (and elevated) them from the black workers who also sharecropped in the Delta. Richard Dyer (1997) describes their experience when he writes, “To work outside the home... is to be exposed to the elements, especially the sun and the wind, which darken white skin. Thus, to be darker, though racially white, is to be inferior” (p. 57). I remember visiting my great grandmother (Big Mamaw) in Mississippi when I was a child. She lived right in the middle of miles and miles of cotton fields on a small plot of land, the tiny house shaded by very old, large trees. She had working plumbing, but I vividly remember the outhouse that still stood prominently in her yard. She had no television or other source of entertainment, and since TV was such a big part of my own life, I often wondered what she did with her time besides put up vegetables and cook for a non-existent crowd, for relatives rarely gathered here. They came to visit, but always congregated at my grandmother’s house.

My grandmother (Mamaw) spent her later years working in a textile factory alongside other relatives living in Lambert, Mississippi, less than 100 miles from where Elvis Presley was born and raised. The proximity to such a star often spurred nostalgic recollections about his meager beginnings and his rise to fame. When all the brothers and sisters (my aunts and uncles) would congregate at Mamaw’s house, there would be a huge mob of cousins to get into mischief with. We would arrive from Tennessee and Alabama, and join the cousins living near my grandparents in Mississippi. I remember the hot, sticky nights swinging on the outside porch swing, swatting mosquitoes and listening to my mamaw, papaw,

and aunts yell at me and my cousins to “stop slamming that screen door!” as we ran in and out, grabbing snacks as we went to catch lightning bugs, shoot fireworks, or otherwise just get into mischief. There was constant confusion because of the sheer number of relatives present, and always lots and lots of food. Our meals typically included a heap of fried okra, turnip greens, fresh green beans, sliced tomatoes, creamed corn, squash, peas, cathead biscuits and cornbread; all homemade from scratch and fresh from the garden. Both my grandparents chewed tobacco, and someone always tripped over a spittoon at least once while we were there, spilling chewed tobacco, and spit all over the floor.

We would always visit at my aunt’s house while we were there, since she only lived a couple of blocks away. A hairdresser by trade, she loved to crank up the country music on her stereo while she cut and permed our hair. I spent many hours there listening to country music superstars such as Loretta Lynn, Conway Twitty, Patsy Cline, and George Jones. My aunts were referred to as Sissy, and I had uncles who were called Bubba, “A common nickname which Southern white girls applied to their younger brothers, ‘Bubba’ became roughly synonymous with “good ol’ boy,” a drawling, disarming sort who actually thought much faster than he talked and was generally adept at seeming less competent or ambitious than he really was” (Cobb, 2005, p. 224).

There was a Methodist church right across the street from my grandmother’s home, and although there was very little conversation about religion on these visits, my grandmother attended every time the doors opened.

The old family Bible she kept in the house recorded the births and deaths of members of the family.

Since the town was so small, my cousins and I were allowed to walk the short trek through the neighborhood and into town to get cokes (sometimes called dope by the older generation) and candy at the local drugstore. Inside the store, there was a soda fountain, where a soda jerk (the server) would prepare delicious ice cream shakes and treats at a small bar with a couple of spinning bar seats. The store was at the end of the block, adjacent to the train tracks that were the dividing line of the town. We were not allowed to venture anywhere close to the tracks, or to cross to the other side. The “other” side was where the black population of the town lived. Absolutely no interaction was allowed between the black and white communities. No one had to speak it, because it was very much a lived reality. A fear was placed in me that something bad would happen to me if I ever crossed that invisible barrier between the two communities, a fear that would unconsciously follow me into adulthood. If we encountered any blacks anywhere in or around town, we were to ignore and avoid them as if they had the plague. It was as if we were taught (without words) that we were not to be contaminated by their presence.

Once the textile plant in the area shut down, many people lost their livelihood. The community began to deteriorate, and the economic devastation pretty much closed the whole town down. The town still exists, but there is only a small remnant of people left in the town. There are no jobs and very few resources left for the remaining residents, the majority of whom are black.

My father grew up in Paint Rock, Alabama, where the infamous case of the “Scottsboro Boys,” a case of gross injustices towards nine black teenagers who were falsely accused and convicted of terrible crimes, took place. The racist legacy of the area remains intact today. Although his mother was present in his life, his grandparents, who owned a small general store, mostly raised him. Paint Rock was a very small town, just as the town in which my mother grew up. The highlight of my visits there was getting to go to Rousseau’s general store around the corner and buy fireballs and moon pies and other assorted candies, and swing on the front porch swings while drinking Cokes out of small glass bottles, or making Coke floats out of Coke and ice cream. Occasionally, we would drop the fireballs into the bottles and squeal with delight as the Coke would fizz up and overflow the bottle like an erupting volcano. The slow, boring, obligatory walk up the road in the hot sun and humidity to the cemetery to visit the graves of relatives I barely remembered, or never knew was always a part of our visit, as was huge meals consisting of fried chicken, biscuits, and my favorite, homemade chicken and dumplings. There was never a meal served that didn’t include dessert, such as a pecan pie, or an apple cobbler with ice cream. If it were cool outside, we would sit in the living room and listen to religious music from the record player blaring as Johnny Cash would sing of the mercies of God. On occasion, my grandmother, always dressed in her gown and robe and surrounded by prescription pill bottles because she was always “sick,” would take her seat at the old upright piano and play hymns. At night in the summer, the windows were left wide open to catch any slight breeze that might drift in. It was so hot sweat would soak the bed. The

heat, along with the sound of the trains roaring through town on the nearby tracks would keep me from finding sleep. In keeping with tradition, if we had a toilet emergency in the middle of the night, instead of going to the bathroom down the hall, we were required to use a “slop jar” that was kept under the bed, a necessity when one used to have to go to a dark outhouse in the middle of the night.

When Highway 72 was built, much of the town was relocated or wiped out; including my grandmother’s old home place with its big white front porch swings. Paint Rock is now barely existent, only a memory in the past residents’ mind. Unlike the black population in Mississippi where the division between races was quite apparent, I do recall seeing one black person at my Grandmother’s place in Scottsboro. I knew her as the woman in the kitchen. Rarely seen or heard from, she spent her time in the kitchen whipping up homemade biscuits, or frying up piles of chicken for Sunday dinner. Afterwards, the kitchen was clean, and she was nowhere to be found.

Although my parents and their families were from different states and towns, the similarity of the two home places I visited through the years is uncanny. It seemed as though both places transported you back in time. The lure of the music, the smell of good food, the slow pace, the scorching heat, listening to the long adult conversation, visiting with neighbors as they walked by; all are just a handful of the things I experienced at my parents’ hometowns as I visited my relatives across the South. Perhaps the most looming similarity I remember was the nostalgia that would manifest in my parents as a yearning to go back to the home place and recapture a part of their roots. We did not take vacations as a

family. Although both my parents experienced their share of hardship and dysfunction in their families as children, when my father took vacation time off from work, it was spent at my relative's houses in Alabama or Mississippi. It seemed to be an escape to their past, to "the good old days." Many other perspectives and attitudes were a part of my Southern family's consciousness, and consequently, the historical memory from my parents' past that they brought from their upbringing had great significance in the context of how I was raised. Being raised in this the deep-south mentality; I adapted, both consciously and unconsciously, many of their spoken and unspoken southern beliefs and attitudes as my own.

I grew up in a middle class family on Signal Mountain, a suburb of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Although my family was a far cry from wealthy, Signal Mountain was home to many upper middle class and wealthy families. In the Chattanooga area, families from Signal Mountain were referred to as "new money," and residents from Lookout Mountain, another suburb of Chattanooga, were referred to as "old money." Both mountains, along with the valley of Chattanooga, played significant roles in the Civil War, and Civil War history is everywhere. When I was a young girl, I remember attending a Southern cotillion ball, an event quite revered in the South, and still a huge yearly event in Chattanooga, where young debutantes, historically white, from affluent families were "presented" to society. As a member of the Girl Scouts, I learned manners and etiquette proper to a Southern young lady. I learned through experience that the women cooked, washed the dishes, and took care of the house while the men

went off to work and earned a living. Men went hunting, fishing, and watched football while the women cooked, cleaned, and went shopping, and children did not speak unless spoken to. Every issue of *Southern Living* magazine, which promotes and glorifies the Southern lifestyle, was predictably a staple in the house I grew up in, and continued to be in my own home for decades into my married life. I characterize the popular publication as somewhat of a “continuing education” course for married Southern women investing their time in creating gracious and hospitable homes, raising respectable Southern children, and supporting their husbands in their professional conquests. Churches were abundant in the area, but attendance as a family in my house was a rarity, (all they want is your money, I was told) but living in the Bible belt brings religious influence into the lives of even the un-churched. We never discussed religion at home. It was understood that religion was a personal matter. Even so, my older sister and I were still expected to believe and live by Christian teachings and morals. Since most of our neighbors attended church, my sister and I were invited and frequently participated in the local United Methodist youth groups and the children’s choir. I later learned that there are huge differences between attending church and being a religious person, and being a person of belief and faith.

I led a very sheltered life. Growing up, I often felt imprisoned and lonely. I dreamed of escaping often, and always desired to break out and be free, but it seemed that my opportunities for freedom, even freedom of expression, were very limited. One of the few pleasant memories I have of my youth is riding my bicycle down the curvy hills around my home as the wind blew through my hair. I

felt a sense of independence when I was outside on my bike. I could ride as fast as I wanted with no restraint, up and down the small suburban neighborhoods on the mountain. As I rode along the bluff, I could see the whole city of Chattanooga below me. Usually farther away from home than I was allowed, but safe in the neighborhoods close to my home, I would ride as long as I wanted, and would often stop and take short hikes through the woods and streams near my house. Often, a neighborhood friend would be my companion on these trips. The feeling of being free and unrestrained, even if it were only temporary, was euphoric for both of us.

On other occasions, I would babysit neighborhood children. Taking responsibility when their parents were gone made me feel worthy and needed. I also took liberties after I put the children to bed. I was able to talk on the phone as long as I wanted without anyone listening or telling me to get off. I ate what I wanted and as much as I wanted. I watched what I wanted on television, and would watch until the Star Spangled Banner played and the white noise appeared. This was another one of my ways to escape. Wanting a way to earn money of my own, I began babysitting at the age of ten. Babysitting or working in a daycare was the only opportunity deemed suitable for a young girl such as myself. I babysat neighborhood children until I graduated from high school, and eventually saved enough money to pay for my first car. Many of the families I babysat for would go out and socialize on Friday and Saturday nights, come home smelling of booze, (usually arguing), but made sure they were in attendance with their families at church on Sunday morning. Such is life in the South.

Conversations or discussions about “Adult” issues, which could range from money to sex, politics, current events, or even the death of a relative, were nonexistent in my home. Adult issues and behaviors were just that, adult. If we knew of, or observed questionable behavior by an adult, we were admonished with, “Don’t do as I do, do as I SAY do!” The power hierarchy within the family and the society that surrounded me was very well defined, and I would do well to follow without question. I was never satisfied with short answers meant to satisfy my curiosity and keep me quiet, and must have felt a measure of hypocrisy in what I observed, as I always seemed to push the boundaries of standing in my proper place. I had a desire to express my thoughts, and question my circumstances, but had no outlet at home or at school to do so. This left me frustrated and suffocated. Submission to this hierarchy was expected, and, for a while, the desire to be accepted and loved were my motivators. As I grew older, I eventually rejected that which was forcefully lorded over me. Since my youth, I have always walked in and out of contradictions in my own life, always feeling as if I were a fish swimming against the tide, labeled as a black sheep in the midst of a herd of white. I was a misfit. Just as Whitlock states, “As a misfit, I identify as a Southerner and I feel a deep attachment to Southern place, yet constricting notions of Southernness...negate aspects of my experience, identity, desire, and worldview” (2007, p. 149). Growing up as the misfit in the family, I was never able to please my parents, never seemed to do anything right, and could never seem to reach the vague standards that both society and my family held up before me. Because of this, I resisted any control others tried to place me under,

alienated myself, and fought against what was expected and acceptable in the culture in which I was raised. I have continued to oppose anything that gave me the feeling of being boxed- in, cornered, restrained, or controlled all my life. This is not always an easy stance to take, as it has often brought me to a place of discomfort. Metaphors such as “go against the grain” or “swim against the tide”; these define my life. While the South has defined my identity, I haven’t always easily fit into that Southern mold. Although my consciousness and my existence have been unabatedly Southern, I find that challenging this dominant narrative is taboo.

Although I have never been afraid to push boundaries, it has kept me in constant diabolical angst against the conscious and unconscious forces within my psyche. As I become more and more aware of my Southernness, I am frequently disturbed and angered at the perpetuation of the attitudes and ideology that I see and hear manifest around me, that has been ingrained in my South throughout the generations. I often find myself in the middle of my familiar Southern surroundings, the places I love, my home and community, my Southern consciousness, shocked at the unjust attitudes towards other races, classes, or sexes that resist my constant rebuttal. At times, I am shocked at my own reaction, or inaction, towards those same attitudes. Those attitudes of Southern consciousness reside in me, and where I live and work, and hold a place of familiarity. It is as Whitlock (2007) describes, “The complexity of the contemporary South lies within the raced, classed, gendered, sexual, and religious tensions of place-in-time” (p. 62).

I have been saturated in Southern culture all my life, and that is what has shaped my attitudes and formed my identity. Whether spoken or unspoken, the “collective consciousness” (Émile Durkheim and other philosophers) which is uniquely Southern was passed down to me just as surely as were my blue eyes and my unusually pale skin. I am about as Southern as they come, the product of the Southern white, patriarchal system that still reigns in this society today.

All my educational experiences from kindergarten through college have also been exclusively Southern. I experienced many feelings of uncertainty about my future as I progressed through school. These feelings replicated the uncertainty of the political, moral, and social climate during the 1960’s and 1970’s, when my own “schooling” began. This was a time of major shifts both in American education and in society. The subjects of desegregation, civil rights, women’s rights, the Vietnam War, the race to the moon, the cold war, the sexual revolution, and Watergate, to name just a few, never made it into the discussions at school or at the dinner table. I felt that I must be inferior in some way. I must be incapable of knowing or learning about these events. Otherwise, I would be included in discussions about such important happenings. Since lessons at school typically originated out of a textbook, my education of these historical events came via the three national networks that were a daily part of my routine as soon as I arrived home from school every day. I was mindful of and concerned myself with fears of possible nuclear bomb attacks, overpopulation, the energy crisis, and environmental concerns, yet had nowhere to take these concerns and discuss

them. The issues concerning me were not up for discussion either at home or at school.

During my first few elementary years, I attended an established private Lutheran Church school in Chattanooga. I can only speculate that the reason I did not attend public schools at that time had more to do with race relations in the city as opposed to religion. The increase of “white flight” from public schools into private and religious schools is discussed by Michael Apple (2001, p. 40). He explains that, although the original premise of Southerners forming Christian schools is in order to avoid secular humanism, one of the effects is that it also separates blacks from whites. Thus, the issue is not just one of religion, but also race (p. 147).

In my first school, I remember the rooms being vast spaces, darkened with wood floors and windows from wall to wall, and opened to catch the slightest breeze during the hot and humid days. My teachers there were very warm and nurturing. I can remember my first grade teacher knitting during our naptime, and allowing us to come up and receive instruction in her art during that time if we had an interest. I felt safe and cared for. On Wednesday, the whole school would attend weekly church services together in the sanctuary. I had not been exposed to the religious rituals of the Lutheran church, so, as a five or six year old, I was a little frightful, and never quite caught on to the “kneel, stand up, recite this,” routine. I just knew to follow the lead of the older students, and to keep quiet, and I would be ok. The first classroom I can remember had several wooden tables surrounded by big clunky wooden chairs. The higher grades had long rows of

large wooden desks that filled up the whole classroom. In 1968 when I was in second grade, my family moved about 20 miles north of Chattanooga to Signal Mountain. From then on, I attended public school. As an adult, I realized that the move further away from the city, away from a growing black population, and into an exclusively white suburb was one of “white flight.” At my new school, the classrooms were more modern, with smaller rooms, and desks and equipment that appeared much newer than I was accustomed to in my old school. The school, classrooms, and teachers lacked that warm feeling my previous school had. Within both these schools, however, the rigid structure of the classrooms and the orderly culture within remains the key similarity that I remember.

I was often bored in school, and spent a lot of time daydreaming in class, occupying my mind with anything except the subject at hand. The notes on my report card often read, “Donna is a bright child, but she spends a lot of her time daydreaming.” Withdrawing in this way was a form of flight for me. In school, I applied myself only just enough to get by. I spent much of my time from third grade through high school at home unable to go anywhere or do anything because of being grounded for bringing home C’s on my report card. School did provide an escape from the authoritarian oppression I felt at home, and it was an opportunity for me to experience social interaction, which I craved. I was not happy at school or at home, and often felt trapped in a smothering paralysis at both places. At home, I retreated to my room to the television or stereo. Music became my friend. As I matured, I often plotted how I might run away, or commit suicide, but relegated myself to the fact that either solution would not negate my

problems. My primary goal became to endure the circumstances until I graduated from high school. I lived for the day I could leave home and go to college, once again, not for an education, but as a way out of my confinement, and as a means of living my own life.

I only remember one class in high school that I enjoyed, and it had an impressionable effect on my life. It was a health class. I had always had some interest in science, and this health class really piqued my interest. One of the high school football coaches was the instructor, and he did not teach in the typical way most of my teachers did. Everyone dreaded his class, because he made it very difficult for even the smarter students to succeed. He taught the class more as a biology class than a health class. For me, his teaching made the human body come alive. As he lectured, he did so in a way that allowed me to visualize the actions of human cells as they served their respective purposes in the human body. I learned more from his class than most of my other classes combined. My goal had always been to become a doctor as I was growing up, an anesthesiologist to be precise, and his class confirmed my desires. After high school, with little to no guidance, I was presented with limited choices for college, so I decided to attend where my sister had graduated from the previous year. I determined that I would start with science courses there and transfer to a nearby college; comparable in size, cost, and distance from home, that offered a nursing degree, which was a more “reasonable” option for a middle-class southern girl like myself. However, when it came time to transfer, I was not allowed to go. Limited by sex, class, and opinions about how much education was really necessary for me to be able to

graduate and support myself, I had to choose a major from the university I was currently attending if I wanted to continue my education. Disappointed, but determined to “school” my way out of burdensome limitations, I poured over the university catalog and settled on what I felt was a compromise; Speech Pathology. This career had clinical and medical components that appealed to me. I was amazed that, as a speech pathology student in college, the linguist who taught my phonetics classes accurately pinpointed the geographical area where I grew up simply by listening to my Southern drawl. He indicated that if I worked on changing my speech patterns, it would give me more of an advantage in my professional endeavors.

How odd that the career I ended up with led me back into the public school system I had so loathed when I was growing up! I was hoping to be able to work in a Speech and Hearing clinic, but without my Clinical Competency Certificate, which took many more hours of instruction that I could not afford, I was unable to land a job that would be self-supportive. Moving back home was not an option, so I became a Speech Pathologist in a public school and began what would become my lifelong career in education. At that time, many of the girls I attended high school and college with were more interested in finding a husband than obtaining a career and becoming independent. Attending the right university, and meeting the appropriate types of people was often a way to fulfill the stereotypical “Southern Living” dream of being married to a supportive husband that could finance a nice home in the suburbs, complete with two kids and a dog. Never satisfied with the status quo, I continually attempted to reach through my

naivety and grasp for more understanding of what life was all about, and how I was to navigate through it. I could never “fit the mold” and figure out how to turn on the “Southern charm” that other young women I knew found so easy to use in order to obtain what they wanted. I would never be that ideal Southern lady who knew how to manipulate, and how to be manipulated, to her benefit.

It is sad to me as I look back on the decades of my formal and informal education and realize that, in all the knowledge accumulation and learning experiences I participated in, most of it was void of any creativity, critical analysis, self-awareness, enjoyment of, or compassion for humanity. The education I received from my public school and undergraduate experience consisted of sketchy, disconnected facts; full of holes, which I had great difficulty filling or connecting. I, just as many of the students today, had trouble figuring out why I was required to learn certain things, and what purpose they would serve in my life. I learned that it was not my place to question, but instead, to conform, which was a difficult and frustrating task for me. Thankfully, I would later be encouraged to ponder these wonderings and to view them as the most important questions to be asked in curriculum studies by the lectures and writings of William Schubert. He states, “the *what is worthwhile* question is the essence of the curriculum field” (2008, p. 43). At the time, however, the majority of subjects I was taught in school did not seem relevant or interesting to me, and consequently, I often had difficulty paying attention. This kept me frustrated and confused. After jumping through the hoops, and going on to complete my

bachelor, master, and specialist degrees, I still felt that I had gained very little, real, useful knowledge or critical awareness of the world I live in.

I have now taught in public schools for over 30 years, and still witness the same frustration, oppression, and indifference in all students today as I experienced myself. John Dewey (1902/2001) posits that it is necessary that educators are capable of identifying and addressing the individual needs of all students in order for each individual to have an opportunity to become capable of developing fully as a human being, and to learn to participate productively in the democratic ideal. Perhaps if there had been that individual or educator in my path that was willing to question the existing hegemony, it would have lessened my years of struggle and frustration as I searched for meaning in education. My thirst for more education was one way that I have sought out deeper personal development. This thirst is what led me to begin my final degree close to the end of my public school teaching career. My doctoral studies at Georgia Southern provided a welcome reprise from the empty and lifeless courses I had taken in my previous degrees. My studies have exposed me to a range of scholars, and have helped me gain a deeper insight into many diverse social, political, and educational issues, as well as insights into my own identity and personal psyche. I now have a better understand of some of the roots of my frustration within schooling and society. The building blocks of my life have led me to place my own experiences into the context of how schooling works to hinder the full development of individuals, and fosters the success of only a narrow few. My studies have been an enlightening and refreshing learning experience, but have

also brought me to a new place of exile in both my personal and professional life. Edward Said illustrates my plight as he describes the "...condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being" (1994, p. 53). As I navigate my life as a Southern white educator and Curriculum Studies scholar, I face increased contradictions within the culture and curriculum that I live in. Ivor Goodson recognizes this complexity of past and present identity within personal narratives.

In Ivor's view stories may be individually narrated but they are not autonomous creations. They are instead social constructions in two senses. The first is that they proceed from and embody a particular consciousness, one that is itself a product of its social, structural, and cultural location....Second, personal stories draw on dominant, prefigurative, or prior, "scripts" in their construction (Downs, 2013, p. 75).

Goodson defines "scripts" as our stories as they evolve in geographical and historical place and time (Downs, 2013, p. 75).

In *A River Forever Flowing: Cross-cultural Lives and Identities in the Multicultural Landscape*, Ming Fang He descriptively portrays the phenomena of being "in-between" cultural identities using a river metaphor, as she navigated her way through her homeland of China to the American academy. She sees her identity as never having become completely Chinese, and never becoming completely Western. I feel this sense of being in-between as I remain in the

everyday reality that is elementary public education, while I immerse myself in the challenging philosophies and ideologies that are curriculum studies.

Examining and explaining these two cultural experiences in my life illustrates how I and other educators may come to understand:

The ways in which their personal histories, cultures, and experiences affect who they are, how they perceive the world, and how they interact with others and an increasingly diversified world. Such cross-cultural understanding also develops the ability to empathize actively with others and to see one's self as a member of an expanding world community as well as a local community (He, 2003, p. xix).

In examining different ways to think and do curriculum, I now experience dilemmas, angst, and the contradictions between the past and present scripts of my white, Southern, female-educator/scholar identity. As illustrated in this autobiographical account, "A confluence of powerful events that have shaped modern American identity and its understanding of race –from slavery and the Civil War to Reconstruction, Jim Crowe, and the civil-rights movement – has occurred in the South" (Hoelscher, 2003, p. 663). Being a life-long resident of the deep South, these historical events, whether directly or indirectly a part of my personal experience, are deeply ingrained in my identity, and have shaped who I am as an individual and as an educator. Consequently, my cultural identity is a strong entity, carved in my heart, and not frequently abandoned with ease.

A Woman's Work is Never Done

Most public education teachers, especially at the elementary level, are females. Some of a teacher's everyday challenges occur due to the sexist attitudes stemming from the disproportionate power hierarchy among males and females within our schools. "The structure of the school replicates the patriarchal structure of the family. The women who maintain daily contact with children and nurture them, are themselves trained, supervised, and evaluated by men" (Grumet, 1988, p. 85). This is exemplary on a daily basis at our school as the students (children) take orders from and obey their teacher (mother), while the "men in charge" (father) at the school, county, state, and national level hold the highest level of authority, and have the greatest impact over the entire structure. This patriarchal hierarchy is particularly evident in the South. Girls in the South learn at a young age that it is beneficial for them to cultivate certain proper cultural habits. In order to be considered decent, acceptable, and desirable, girls must take their appearance seriously, be well groomed, not question authority because it is not lady-like, and they must learn to be sweet, helpful, and charmingly feminine, yet remain strong and emotionless through great adversity. These lessons learned are hard to dismiss or reverse when girls are conditioned to conform, and society's expectations weigh heavily on them. As a teacher, I have seen and experienced the impact it makes on the school climate when a teacher attempts to challenge decisions that were made outside her authority that have detrimental effects on her and her students. I have seen teachers that were hired because they made an

impressive appearance, while others that were not quite so well groomed were passed up for positions, even after they had proved themselves competent educators.

Many women have had to endure, fight, or succumb under pressure to this type of sexual exploitation. In the South, it is expected that women will fit into the sexist ideals created by our culture. The power order is not in their favor. Our religious and social institutions we trust our daughters to through the course of their lives, including our schools and homes, are a cesspool of oppressive abuse and sexist attitudes. “The solution to sexual inequality was equity in the treatment of women and men and an equitable division of resources, including power” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Taubman, 1995, p.366). That equity of power and equal division of resources falls very short of most women’s experiences, especially in a teaching career where the majority of employees are female. The attitudes and beliefs held by the Swiss-French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, evident in his classic work *Émile: Ou, Del’education*, written in 1762, is a shocking account of the values of the day, and are still notably present in Southern culture. In his description of how a (man) child should be educated in order to produce an ideal man, Rousseau describes how “The entire education of women must be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to be loved and honored by them...to make their lives pleasant and charming.” I have heard many Southern males, from older men to young boys, make comments resembling Rousseau’s opinion of what they believe to be a woman’s role in life. It is a sad thing to acknowledge that these same expectations and views about

gender roles are still alive and evident in the South today. This type of destructive, dehumanizing ideology should be abandoned and replaced with an ideology which will promote, rather than smother women's diverse roles in society, and raise awareness that the roles females choose to walk in should be open and unlimited. Just as whites are often blinded by their whiteness, many of the young girls and women in the South are not consciously aware that such deeply ingrained prejudices stand in the way of their dreams and aspirations being fulfilled. Young girls deserve an equal opportunity to experience a greater freedom to explore their true potential without their culture molding them into unrealistic, gender-driven roles. Girls and young women in the South should feel supported and encouraged as they grow and make personal choices that guide their future, rather than feeling pushed into options that are limited by the Southern culture that oppresses and exploits them. "Women have fought to matter in the social contexts they inhabit – some through and within traditional roles, and others despite them" (Villaverde, 2008, p. 17). Broadening their horizons to include examples of women who have realized their potential in non-traditional roles and rejected the roles culture expects of them would be a step towards change. Change comes through the act of acknowledging the historical significance of sexist roles and expectations. Examining and acknowledging the past is a gateway for social change in the present and future. Our society, from the home to our schools, should act as a promoter of change, rather than a hindrance to certain individuals, so girls may have the opportunity to choose according to

their desires and talents, rather than submit to the subordinate role expected of them, and live reality in a new light, realizing unlimited possibilities.

Rejecting what our society has projected as common (male-dominated, oppressive) wisdom is also an important step towards change. It wasn't until 1967 that an executive order declared gender as a category of discrimination, and two years later, a prominent feminist group "decried patriarchy as the most basic form of domination and the one thread that ran through all other forms of oppression" (Villaverde, 2008, p. 44). Nowhere is this more evident than in our public school settings in the South. The frequent curricular reform efforts that we experience are often a result of legislation enacted by the male dominated political system in the state of Georgia, where over 80% of the elected officials are males. Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (2007) state that "The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically Western and masculine way of thinking..." (p. 15). This masculine, dominating, data-driven thinking is what drives the many trends educators (who are overwhelmingly female) are required to conform to in a constantly changing environment in curriculum reform today. Researchers and curriculum creators push reforms, such as those consisting of high-stakes standardized testing and teacher evaluations based on these tests, and often demand that teachers deliver specified presubscribed curriculum content by certain chosen research-based techniques and data driven practices. This undermines the more important issues such as the development of community, passion for others, relationship, humanity, justice, freedom, and rights and choices for the good of all. The mindset that drives these

reform acts perceive that truth, accuracy, and knowledge are discovered only in scientific, objective observation and study. The more subjective, extracting, and caring ways of thinking and acting are viewed as feminine, and are traditionally of less value in the academic realm in our male-dominated society (Noddings, 1988). Other scholars agree that these supposedly “feminine” ways of doing and knowing are much more appropriate and result in positive and more successful results regardless of the race, gender, or class of the student or teacher. One form of knowledge should not be valued over another, and validated simply because of sexist views.

As teachers, we constantly live under the duress of dictation and control. Many young women have struggled and stumbled through our uncaring and impatient institutions, experiencing extreme limitations and control of their personal and professional options because of their sex. McLaren (1998) recognizes how the structure of schooling disadvantages females in their educational endeavors. Our society

Obscure[s] the ways in which the structure of the system within white supremacist patriarchal capitalism determines to a great extent which class and gender will be successful and which will fail. In this way, the educational system ensures the hereditary transmission of the status quo by appearing neutral, by concealing its social function of reproducing class relations by constructing technologies of gender, but perpetuating the myth of the quality of opportunity based on scholastic merit. (p. 209).

There is a need for girls to have an opportunity to connect with elements that allow them to have a clearer understanding of the patriarchal system they live in, and provide alternative possibilities in order for them to thrive, despite the cultural restrictions at work in their homes and on their jobs. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) conducted a study in the 1970's exploring how women from all races and classes constructed personal (and educational) knowledge, and shared significant experiences, which influenced their way of knowing. One of their conclusions was that "Educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding, and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate" (p. 229). They realized that "The contributions and perspective of working women, even those with well-established careers, are often overlooked or dismissed" (Belenky et al., p. 12). Women in such positions "Hold considerable leverage and can be in particularly strategic positions to help [other] women find the power that resides in their own minds, as well as in the minds of others" (Belenky et al., p. 49). Many women have valuable, liberating stories to share which may help young girls learn and profit from their personal experiences.

As young girls approach adulthood and begin choosing their life course, the imbalance of power surrounding them, which is perpetuated by society, begins to become more and more apparent. Many find their career choices are often limited to traditional "roles." Possible careers considered by some as being more "masculine" in nature, such as a computer technologist, machinist, financier, or engineer, are construed as inappropriate for young women desiring to put their

talents to work. What Southern society views as a much more acceptable career for a young woman would be a secretary, or nurse, or, of course, a teacher! Becoming a teacher is a respected occupation and role for a young Southern girl who needs to work, but plans to marry and have children, which of course, has been society's expectation for them for generations. The prevailing attitude remains that such a career will prepare her for motherhood, and allows her to have time off to care for her children when they not attending school, while their husbands work and provide for the family. "One of the first professions to which women turned was teaching, a vocation that has seemed to many to parallel women's traditional responsibilities as mothers" (Pinar, 2004, p. 107). As is commonly known, a highly disproportionate number of primary school teachers in America are women. "American educators throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century have internalized the notion of subordination as a primary framework for behavior within the classroom...and who better than women to project such ideals?" (Miller, 1980, p. 32). The expected subordination of women serves to enslave and silence teacher voices.

Many unjust and stifling, imprisoning practices occur within elementary schools every day, with female teachers being the recipient of the dominance and power exercised by the white male patriarchal system. The elementary field of education is often viewed as less significant than other educational settings, lacks the most basic support, and often serves as a dumping ground for all of society's ills. This, I posit, is partly due to the subordinating, patriarchal, sexist views, which are perpetually demeaning to females, including those who teach young

children. Women who work in the field of education receive little or no personal or professional respect. They are often addressed in a condescending manner on a daily basis. When a female teacher assigns an activity and an 8-year-old boy yells out; “Woman! What are you talking about!” as a challenge to the teacher’s authority, it is evident that the condescending attitude towards females runs deep in our Southern roots. Since women are considered the less competent, weaker sex, men often react as if women are less capable, and must be guided and supervised in their endeavors. Women are considered emotionally, intellectually, and physically inferior to their male counterparts. These underlying attitudes magnify the issues of power which often silence competent and capable teachers, and can be witnessed through the male-dominated system of knowledge that is promoted in our political and educational structures as superior when analyzing curriculum issues and making important decisions regarding the education of our youth. One only has to check out the current state of affairs of the National, State, and Local Board of Education, or the economically and politically driven educational organizations, all typically male-dominated, as they make extraordinarily uninformed and illogical educational decisions that cripple and silence millions of female teachers and their students every year.

Lack of respect for female educators and researchers is also evident in institutions of higher education. For example, white privileged males have dominated the research chosen for publication over the last 30 years in curriculum studies. This phenomenon is beginning to change, as more and more women attend college and obtain advanced degrees.

Many narrative inquiries in education have been conducted with and in relation to elementary and secondary classroom teachers, whose profession we well know is regarded still as “feminized” (Apple, 1986; Hoffman, 1981; Greene, 1978; Stone, 1994). I believe this is one reason classroom teacher research is still not regarded as “real” research among portions of the university educational research community. (Miller, 2005, p. 92)

The educational system and society as a whole devalue women. Females have been labeled, sorted, tracked, and deemed “less than” their male counterparts by societal elements in place that are deeply rooted in history, particularly Southern history. Janet Miller (2005) recounts her own experience with the Southern good-old-boy attitude after she divorced and went back to school to obtain her doctorate degree and start a career in the university. She received this reaction from one of her colleagues after she was accepted for employment at the university; “Sighed one of my elderly colleagues at the university, a true southern gentleman who welcomed me into the male-dominated department: “Well, at least you’ve been married.” (p. 70).

Despite the limitations placed on women and girls in our culturally vision-challenged society, women often show increased effort and resilience in order to survive and thrive within the restricted opportunities society has invisibly constructed for them. “Offering girls safe spaces for real conversation and social critique means fully appreciating the ways schools position girls in the good or bad and developing creative, age-relevant ways to educate girls about the culture

of power” (Weiss & Fine, 2005, p. 161). Nowhere in America are these oppressive attitudes towards females more abundant than in the South. Before the ink has dried on their birth certificate, females born and raised in the South are placed (or might I say pigeonholed!) into a unique category. The South is more than a regional geographical location. It is a tangle of historically peculiar sociocultural phenomena that intertwines class, gender, race, political, and religious characteristics which are embedded in, and which place mythical restraints within the minds and hearts of those who call the South their home. Women born and raised here are faced with high expectations from society that they will grow up to follow the historical traditions of a true Southern girl; preconceived and predetermined roles, rigid expectations, customs and attitudes which are expected to be repeated and emulated generation after generation. Mantras ingrained in Southern girls, such as, grow up proper and strong, be tough, but lady-like, mind your manners, marry well, raise a respectable family, and support your man at all costs are standards that are expected from Southern women and have been a part of the culture for many decades. “Southern popular wisdom that takes for granted a paradox of strength and frailty in white Southern women ...remains discernible today” (Pinar, 2004, p. 115).

The personal lived experiences of generation after generation of women born and raised in the South embody the hierarchal monoculturalism that is evident in the traditions and customs of the area. “Scholars generally agree that Southerners feel a regional identity and consciousness, which suggests there is

indeed such an entity as Southernness, and it is based upon a condition that comes from being in and part of the South” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 22). Alice Walker, who grew up in Eatonton GA, less than 200 miles from the community under study, speaks with a deep familiarity of how this monoculture is perpetuated.

The dominant culture, whose values are designed to encourage the full development of the white and the male only; and not even of the disadvantaged in those categories, leaves the rest of us unsupported, except in ways that are frequently injurious to us. (1997 p. 53)

Southern women, regardless of race or class, are expected to subordinate themselves to their male counterpart, and suffer in this subordination of their person. This is illustrative of the multiple social positions we occupy, how they interweave, complicate and are sometimes contradictory overlapping and shifting. “Paying attention to this helps us clearly recall that one can be simultaneously advantaged by one form of privileged while feel disadvantaged by a different aspect of our social identity” (Tochluk, 2010, p. 120).

In Whitlock’s collection of essays depicting life in the South and queerness (2013), Kate Black tells of her experience with Southern masculine supremacy in her family as she grew up. “In keeping with American cultural practices of the time, they believed boys were more important. My father told me I needed to smile more, to not “talk back,” and to learn the “social graces.” (p. 205). I closely identify with her conclusion about male authority. “For me, authority is always suspect; it seeks to kill some part of our spirit and trains us not to think for ourselves” (p. 216).

Southern women experience this forced dominance and subordination frequently, especially when they present themselves as outspoken or independent, as Alice Walker did. Assertiveness such as Walker's is not looked upon as a positive female trait in the South. It is expected that women should take on a more subservient role, quietly serving others, rather than selfishly thinking of themselves. They are expected to be submissive and obedient in their servitude. These and other attitudes and traditions make the South appear to be stuck in time, holding onto past mores, slowly moving forward in social development as compared to the rest of the nation, especially regarding equality among the sexes. Many native Southern families continue to perpetuate a lack of passion in our young females to reach towards their abilities and aspirations. These social tenants frequently in place in the South work to limit and suppress the growth, imagination, and self-fulfillment of the potential of females. Although females in the South are a diverse population when considering race, gender identity, societal roles, expectations, and class, "...it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (Lourde 1984, p. 44). Many intelligent, talented girls are forced into familiar traditional roles, oblivious of possible undiscovered opportunities. One powerful factor present in the structure of Southern society that is responsible for and perpetuates these structures is the strong sense of belonging, and the significance of home and place that is ingrained into an individual's psyche. Whitlock ascribes this mindset to the "Home place that reproduces itself through the perpetuation of sameness [which] discourages and castigates difference within and without, whether that difference

is detected in the individual or in social, cultural, ethnic, religious, or political groups that threaten what it perceives as its sanctity” (2007, p. 70). This “unholy alliance” of sameness unites and often paralyzes those already marginalized by gender. Choosing different paths from the sameness that is expected is overridden by the feelings of guilt and separation arising from the sense of loyalty to “home.” Southerners are experts at bringing nostalgic guilt to individuals desiring to take different paths from the sacred Southern generational traditions. “Invented traditions are the key to securing the emotional and political allegiance of the majority of the population at large” (Cobb, 2005, p. 81). As female educators, we need to remain steadfast and push forward and continue to break barriers, which our female predecessors have slowly eroded. Many opportunities abound for women from the South to play a more significant role in encouraging and promoting the talents, competence, and abilities that they possess. Through my research, I hope to bring more awareness to those that are a part of the educational arena as well as non-educators, and play a part in breaking silences created by the imbalance of power between male and female, which hinders and entraps Southern women.

And Justice for All

We do not ordinarily contemplate how we, as a society or culture, can improve our lives collectively, though we spend much of our energy and resources thinking of how can we profit. Often, individuals, companies, and

organizations choose to profit regardless of how it may affect others, or what the cost may be to an individual's quality of life. This creates an imbalance of power, and while one may benefit, another may suffer. This dominant/dominated ideology plays out in our society as well as within our schools. "Schools serve societies; societies shape schools" (Ayers, 2004, p. 8). As we search for ways to promote individual liberation and greater democracy in a society that is burdened with issues of power and domination, we look at the works of the German philosopher, Hegel. "Hegel believed that while individuals all shared a common culture, a people was only really alive to the extent that their most basic beliefs and principles were under continual criticism and skeptical challenge" (Blunden, 2013, p. 14). For our culture to shift from one that holds many relationships of oppressor and oppressed, we must, as Hegel encourages, continue to question and challenge the principles and motives that undergird our society. Although Paulo Freire's premise differentiated from Hegel's views, both were concerned with the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate. Freire believed that the true liberation of individuals could not arise from a 'savior' stepping in to take the lead, for that would just result in a different form of domination. In discussing Hegel's and Marx's influence on the works of Paulo Freire, Blunden states that, "In order to emancipate ourselves, we have to bring to light the contradiction within our own situation-and no one can do it for us. Only an imminent critique reveals the truth of the situation and allows change" (2013, p. 22). Someone must arise from within the oppressed group and issue challenges. The oppressed themselves must stand with a critical voice and declare their injustices freely.

Remembering experiences, and retelling them can bring a flood of complex emotions to the surface, along with vivid recollections of events, which unite to create one's psyche. Through my doctoral studies and inquiries, I have come to a deeper understanding of the power issues and inequalities that I have experienced within the southern culture I grew up in and in my own public school education. My experience mirrored that of Janet Miller, as she illustrates her experience while pursuing higher education. "In a few short semesters, my educational world was turned upside down, reframed by perspectives and critiques of schooling that addressed the deeply felt but largely unarticulated analysis of my ...colleagues" (1992, p. 19). I now recognize some of the destructive, incarcerating ideologies that have been implanted in me through my upbringing, and through the institutional and societal dogmatism I have been exposed to through my life. The works of influential thinkers in such areas as critical theory and pedagogy, social justice, white studies, curriculum of place, southern culture, and feminism, have given me a deeper understanding of my own theoretical framework, and of myself. I view my inquiry through these theoretical lenses. Kincheloe and McLaren state that critical theory "retains its ability to disrupt the status quo" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 433). It is my intention to disrupt my small corner of existence by sharing my own, along with other's stories of how subjugation, oppression, and the myths perpetuated within the Southern culture continue to sustain an imbalance of power, and degrades the quality of curriculum, and of life, for many.

The institutions that shape our teachers and young students are generally inept at encouraging and allowing talent, imagination, and intelligence to flourish. In fact, they work to manipulate and destroy the creativity and talent that does exist, and to lower academic and social expectations for all. Observing, and having been a target of such instances of injustice in our public schools, It is my intention that the school portraiture I created might bring to life the school culture that only individuals present inside the system on a daily basis are privileged to know. It is my hope that the work I present here will help others re-examine their own experiences and ideologies, and become more knowledgeable and better equipped for change, first in themselves, and then towards a more just and equal educational environment for all. A critical emancipatory inquirer “openly declares that the inquirer’s interest is in increasing freedom through his or her work” (Blumenfield-Jones, 2006, p. 243). The important contributions of many theorists working towards social justice serve as a foundational support for change. I hope to join them in illuminating the structural and societal injustices existing in our current system of schooling, which mirrors and reproduces that of our society.

Early in the 20th century, the great philosopher and educator John Dewey made this profound statement: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (1902/2001, p. 5). Since then, there have been multitudes of reviews, reports, and studies published over the last century, which have examined and reported on what they perceive to be the failures of public education. Multiple social and

cultural issues exist today that do contribute to the degradation and demise of the American public education system. These issues and ideologies are at work to destroy and demoralize both teachers and students. We need to change the way we address student needs, interests, and development if we desire to create an atmosphere in which students have opportunity to develop fully as individuals that desire, and are capable of working towards, a more democratic society. “A critical education, in part, creates the conditions for each generation of youth to struggle anew to sustain the promise of a democracy that has no endpoint, but that must be continuously expanded into a world of new possibilities and opportunities for keeping justice and hope alive” (Giroux, 2009, p. 238). Denying teachers and students an atmosphere where a critical, democratic education can flourish is one reason student populations receive a less than fair or equal education. This is not only true of students from poor rural and urban schools, which often are grossly lacking in resources, but also true of many students who attend schools which according to political and economic standards, appear to “meet and exceed” expectations according to state and federal mandates.

Life is full of power struggles, and life inside an elementary school is no exception. Much of the power exercised over our schools in the state of Georgia originates with funding that is provided to the state by the federal government. The policymakers’ push to increase student achievement (a clouded way of saying raise test scores) is ever pressing on the teacher’s mind. The No Child Left Behind act of 2001 (NCLB), signed into law by President Bush, required states to implement standards-based education, assess learning goals with annual

standardized assessments, and prove Adequate Yearly progress (AYP) in order to be eligible for federal dollars. If AYP was not met several years in a row, schools faced punitive actions from the state. The Race to the Top (RT3) initiative, signed by President Obama in 2009, continues these goals, and adds additional requirements and opportunities for funding, such as adopting national common core standards, implementing and using longitudinal data systems to track student progress on tests over time, and improving teacher and leader effectiveness through new performance-based evaluation systems. States may apply for billions of dollars in competitive grants if they choose to meet these new federal guidelines. The new teacher evaluation instrument implemented in Georgia, TKES (Teacher Keys Effectiveness System) grew from the requirements of Race to the Top. The instrument rates teachers on whether or not students show adequate growth (mastering the standards) on standardized tests. Teachers are rated proficient or ineffective based on how well her students perform on a standardized test given once a year, and this growth rate is 50% of a teacher's evaluation score. In addition, the scores students (kindergarten through 12th grade) give the teacher on a student survey inform four out of ten of the standards, or 40% of the standards that a teacher's proficiency is rated on. At the end of the school year, teachers are given their Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM) score. If the TEM falls in the "needs development," or "ineffective" range, she is required to complete a Professional Development Plan (PDP) within a specific date range, and increase the score, or face punitive measures. Just as the standardized measurement movement punishes groups of students that do not

meet or exceed on tests, the teacher evaluation instrument also punishes the teacher if the student's scores do not show growth. Apple correctly observes that reforms often bring "Tighter control over the curriculum, the tail of the test wagging the dog of the teacher and the curriculum, more pressure, more reductive accountability plans- all this may lead to less equitable results, not more" (2001, p. 202). Less equitable results fuel a less than democratic education and unfair outcome for some, which has a negative effect on the collective whole.

In practice, the implementation of educational reforms more often than not, has a negative impact on daily educational practices. It seems as if it is a never-ending flow of reform, implementation, and then on to a new reform. Often, new standards, measures, and practices are created, pushed into school systems that are forced to implement them or risk losing funding, all the while being publicized as the answer to our educational woes. Administrators and teacher educators must receive costly training, and then the classroom teacher is trained and held accountable for the new changes. By the time reforms are integrated into the classroom, another change is brewing. What was promising and new is soon revoked and changed almost as quickly as it was put into place, and the teacher must conform to new guidelines yet again. This happens every few years as the political climate in the state and nation shifts. Reforms are costly, and policymakers demand accountability for their success or failure. This accountability comes in the form of measuring student achievement, which means students are subjected to rigorous standardized tests every year.

Our small community and school in North Georgia have not escaped the effects of the scrutiny and the destabilization of the reforms that have been implemented over the past decades. I see students every day that feel the pressure of meeting standardized goals, regardless of their ability level, or their area of intelligences. Even very young students are required to write out test goals and sign agreement contracts that they will work for a certain point gain on their next nationally- normed curricula assessments, and they eagerly await the news of their outcome after being tested. They are visibly excited or deflated when scores are announced, based on how they perform on these tests. All through the school year, these young students, as young as seven and eight years old, experience stress and anxiety over having to take the test, and are apprehensive over what their score will be. This should not be! A score on a two-hour test that assesses a year's worth of knowledge in one subject should not dictate a student's value and self-image. This has not hindered the state of Georgia from recommending 11 MILLION additional dollars in new funds to implement standardized testing across the state for FY 2014. Education is the biggest expenditure in the state. There are approximately 1,700,000 students in the GA education system, and 9 ½ billion dollars were spent on education in 2013. A total of 44 million of those dollars went towards testing expenditures to test our 1,700,000 students. (GA governor's 2015 budget report).

Now we know why we teach students to regurgitate stratified, disconnected information. And what does this information consist of? Although the educational community preaches project-based learning, critical thinking

skills, and performance assessments, the standardized test is the instrument used to report teacher effectiveness, school progress, and the success of state reforms. Student test outcomes then become the priority of the teacher, and an emphasis on preparing for the test becomes an important part of classroom instruction. The curriculum shifts to what content is included on the test, the type of questions on the test, the language the test uses, and how the strands within a particular subject are weighted. We then require the student to prove they know the material in a 2-hour span, for five days in a row in April on a standardized test. Why do we make any child under the age of ten sit for two hours every day, unable to talk, unable to get out of their seat, unable to go to the bathroom, unable to do anything but stare at a test booklet and a scantron sheet, and then base a teacher's worth, and possibly her job status, on the results, along with a survey that student has completed on how they believe their teacher is performing? Is this type of confinement a normal or reasonable expectation for elementary aged students? Does it even seem reasonable to subject an adult to such criteria? I have taken a number of standardized tests for teacher certification purposes that required hours of confinement and silence. Do scores on such tests really reflect whether I am capable of meeting the educational needs of the students placed in my charge? Standardized testing strengthens the practices of sorting, coding, and tracking individuals into rank according to perceived intelligence and possible productivity. The current mandates have created an atmosphere of both competitiveness and complacency in our schools, where high-stakes testing and

standardization are paramount. “Efficiency, speed, and cost control replace more substantive concerns about social and educational justice” (Apple, 2001, p. 87)

Proponents of standardized testing and rote memorization, such as E. D. Hirsch, believe that, “The teaching of a generous number of carefully chosen exemplary facts within a meaningful explanatory context is a better method for inducing insightful thinking than any proposed alternative” (1996, p. 157). He also promotes the belief that “Learning requires effort. Tests that carry high consequences have been shown over and over again to act as spurs to effort” (p. 178). This statement is not followed by any proof, and I am not convinced. I have witnessed many students over the years memorize facts and be able to regurgitate them for a test without understanding the meaning behind what they learned, and I have done it myself. We spend millions of dollars on standardized testing every year. Who benefits from these high stakes tests? Perhaps it would be more appropriate for us to support students in their quest of knowledge by thinking about and critically examining the issues of life and living that surround them and the community they live in. We must question whether the information we teach is relevant to our students’ lives or not. Teachers need to ask themselves the same thing students often ask; “Why do we have to teach/learn this information?” The billions of dollars spent on education have not been used to improve such pressing issues such as the rise in student per teacher ratio, longer school days for students and teachers with no change in the way curriculum is delivered, rewarding and retaining successful, experienced teachers, needed pay increases, or even a cost of living raise. Teachers are increasingly distressed and overworked, with more

demands constantly being added to their already full work schedule. We are asked to do more than ever but are rewarded with less and less. The average teacher's salary in Georgia has remained the same, or decreased in the last decade.

"Teachers believe that most people don't really understand their work, because if they did, people wouldn't have such negative views. There would be more respect, higher status, and better pay" (Koerner, 1992, p. 54). The dismissal of teachers' educational and professional needs demoralizes them, but just like many of our students, we often passively accept our fate and react out of meaningless habit as we have been trained; follow, don't complain, don't buck the power hierarchy, and act "professionally" in the midst of injustices, which oftentimes means that we must accept things as they are and give of ourselves regardless of the conditions, or risk being looked down upon, or reprimanded.

As elementary teachers, we may begin our day feeling confident, excited, and motivated. Spending time with young students can be energizing, enlightening, and very exhausting, yet extremely rewarding. As we attempt to navigate and adhere to the expectations of administrators and policy makers, these positive emotions are often overcome with feelings of irritation, disillusionment, and helplessness. Part of the frustration teachers experience comes from the fact that the individuals who make the rules, enforce implementation of the curriculum, and evaluate teacher performance, more often than not, have never spent a day inside a classroom teaching the very students they claim will benefit from their newest program or policy. All the while, the tax-paying public is looking to these "experts" to report the progress, or lack thereof, of the school and

its students. The measure of student achievement is based on one thing; test scores. If they are not favorable, it has to be someone's fault. "As we lose ground in our competition with other countries for international markets and military technology...blame is deflected from the men who establish these policies onto the women who teach the children who fail" (Grumet, 1988, p. 23). In the eyes of the public, the teacher must be the one to blame.

Teachers face constant scrutiny and judgment. We are victimized, and often feel powerless against state and federal mandates that demand more and more, yet provides less and less, with no end in sight. "Teachers experience considerably heavier workloads and ever-escalating demands for accountability, a never-ending schedule of meetings, and in many cases a growing scarcity of resources both emotional and physical" (Apple, 2001, p. 76). Since it is against the law for teachers in Georgia to strike, and our contracts forbid collective bargaining negotiations, many teachers feel they have little recourse from the overwhelming load of daily responsibilities required of us, and continue to teach to the best of their ability, despite receiving little respect, reward, or support. Teacher positions are cut, hiring freezes are in effect, class sizes are growing, teacher's salaries have dwindled, systems are forcing teachers to take furlough days, and programs are being cut, yet the teacher is held more accountable for all learning outcomes, and handed more responsibility with less resources, and less income. Grumet (1988) describes the time consuming demands of the teacher, and the high level of commitment it requires, and then goes on to illustrate that the teacher provides this intense labor "without demanding the recompense it

deserves” She goes on to state that, “Over and over again, teachers turn down sabbaticals, in-service, and educational opportunities because they don’t want to leave their classes, as if the development of the teacher and the development of those she teaches were inimical to each other” (p. 87). Oftentimes, we as (female) teachers, accepting our lesser role in society, and acting upon the submissive character ingrained in us as Southern women, accept these unreasonable demands without question, and continue to attempt to fulfill every role placed upon us by those that are higher in authority. It is no wonder teachers experience extreme stress, and often feel like a hamster on a wheel, always moving, but never ever really getting anywhere. It is also no surprise that teacher morale is at an all time low.

Ivan Illich states that, “Learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting” (1970, p. 39). Instead, the learning that takes place in schools is the human activity MOST manipulated by others. Educators have become more and more fearful of teaching outside of the prescribed curriculum when student interest is aroused, or a teachable moment occurs. This fear drives teachers to follow the standardization required, which “decreases the chance of being a reflective practitioner in the course of action. It kills the spontaneous and limits relationships” (Schubert, 1992, p. 9). Gone are the days of shutting the door and doing what is best for your students. There is no democracy or democratic treatment of teachers, and in turn,

teachers feel pressure to structure their classrooms without democratic practices in action.

In the past, I created my own class schedule according to what worked best for me and what my students needed. If I saw a need, I would spend days at a time on a particular skill if the students were struggling, and were motivated to conquer the skill, or a certain concept they wanted to explore. Now, the class schedule, including each minute of the school day, dictates what subject we teach, how long to teach it, and we are held accountable to be “on task,” and spending the prescribed time on what the “master schedule” says. There is no room left for flexibility. Student differences or interests for differing subjects and topics are never considered. The teacher has no say and no authority in the matter. She is silenced, and overpowered by the demands of the curriculum.

The observable practice of silencing is just one manifestation of power in our school settings. Michelle Fine (1992) describes it in this way: “If silence masks asymmetric power relations, it also ensures the impression of democracy for parents and students by appropriating and exporting dissent” (p. 130). If students or teachers express dissent, they often find their voices silenced. Often, it is common practice to label dissenters as negative, independent, and non-cooperative. “In...schools organized around control through silence, the student, parent, teacher, or paraprofessional who talks, tells, or wants to speak transforms rapidly into the subversive, the troublemaker” (Fine, 1992, p. 132). The stimulation of any sort of intellectual dialogue is a very low priority in school. The typical classroom, with its rows of desks or tables facing a central learning

area, does not encourage mutual dialogue. Neither does the expected number of students in a class that a teacher must deal with daily. The sheer volume of students within the walls of a classroom is nonconductive to voice. Just as our students and teachers often suffer in silence daily, we suffer as a nation because of the undemocratic ideology, which promotes gross illiteracy and rewards the voice of conformity. The silencing that occurs daily in schools does not occur without reason. Students receive rewards and praise for maintaining silence every day, and they experience punishment if they do not conform to the standards of silence. Silencing one voice always gives power to another, and teachers and students are often accustomed to living silenced lives within the walls of schools. The structure within public schools perpetuates this manifestation of power, and it is a common everyday practice.

Meredith Maran (2000) illustrates this brilliantly in her portrait of a year in the life of one American high school. Maran takes us on a journey through the students and teachers experiences, triumphs, and heartache. She captures the emotions, tensions, and frustrations of each person in her rich descriptions of daily activities. One account she describes is that of the teachers within the school receiving information in a faculty meeting from their principal. In a presentation brought to them from outsiders, the faculty faces one of many never-ending dilemmas. How to successfully implement changes so that they can maintain their accreditation standing? One teacher responds, “We don’t have time to work on that problem, and the problem will take a lot of time to solve,” a teacher says. “Can you help us with that?” After suggesting that teachers volunteer to come in

earlier in the mornings to work on the problem, the principal states, “We’ve got to wrap up this part of the meeting...thank you gentlemen, for your help” (2000, p. 134).

This is a good example of the silencing of teachers, which goes on in our schools. Policymakers feed administrators a steady diet of what policymakers decide schools need, and in turn, the administrators strap the backs of teachers with the responsibility to carry it out, with very little support. Because the teacher is held accountable for carrying out the reforms, and proving students’ success, the students are “taught at” under pressure, as opposed to “talked to.” There is no democratic interaction in this structure. Dialogue and debate is discouraged. It is expected that teachers will listen and submit, just as students are expected to do in the classroom. This pattern of dictation and control has strengthened in the last decade, as education becomes more and more under the control of economic and political agendas, and less and less directed by educators and student advocates.

Where is the student in all this? On the bottom of the power hierarchy, rarely considered, yet perpetually a victim of the power game. Teachers are often so overwhelmed with the demands of the curriculum that some are not even aware that, while they are delivering the curriculum, the students do not comprehend the lessons. They unknowingly neglect the student’s emotional or physical needs that must be met before learning can even occur. Standardization does not address the realities of some students who may be living in poverty, sickness, or drugs. In addition, “A youngster brings to the classroom a life history of likes and dislikes, interests and experiences” (Melnick, 1992, p. 93) that are never even considered.

Standardization does not take into account the varying cultural environments the children live in, or their personal strengths or interests. The drive to push the curriculum and cover all material contained in the standardized test negates the child's history, culture, and immediate needs of the learner.

Imagine and reflect upon rows and rows of desks, an overcrowded classroom full of other children you do not know, and an authoritative teacher you have never seen before telling you where to sit, what to do, where to go, and how to behave, and you have an image of school through a young child's eyes. I no longer wonder why many kindergarten children entering school cry for the first two weeks they attend public school! The humanity of learning has been stripped from them the instant they walk into the classroom. What a rigid change from the way they have learned all they know about the world from birth to age 5. This stifling structure within the walls of our schools grew from what Foucault discusses as the growth and development of our systems of control and punishment: the prison.

The practice of placing individuals under 'observation' is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures...Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (1977, p. 227).

Our students are told what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, and then required to regurgitate the information in the proper way, using the proper vocabulary, on standardized tests. I have recently heard several older students ask their classroom teacher, "Why do we have to learn this?" However, I have yet to

hear a teacher give a validating explanation to this relevant question. In many instances, the valid answer can only be that they must learn it for “the test.” This should not be our primary focus in the pursuit of knowledge. Our priorities need to change.

The primary purpose of education is to free persons to make sense of their actual lived situations-not only cognitively, but perceptually, imaginatively, affectively-- to attend mindfully to their own lives, to take their own initiatives in interpreting them and finding out where the deficiencies are and trying to transform them. And discovering somehow that there is no end to it, that there is always more to see, to learn, to feel (Greene, 2001, p. 206).

What does it benefit a child to know his multiplication facts or to know the formulation of Pi if she/he has no respect for her/his fellow human beings or her/his environment? If we are constantly pouring facts into students, and they have no prior knowledge or interest, how are we to motivate them? If there is no relevance to the knowledge transmitted in our schools, then what is its purpose? Where will the true love of learning come from? Today, schools are full of students who are disengaged, and feel that they have no power over their own learning. They are rarely allowed an opportunity to exercise any power of judgment. Their days are crammed with the presentation of required material, and there is no space for the freedom of personal reflexivity or personal growth. When we dehumanize individuals in this way, violence erupts. “Dehumanization...is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the

oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed” (Freire, 1970/2008, p. 44). Many students who remain in school are often disengaged, uninterested, inactive, and even angry. This may manifest as boredom, withdrawal, behavioral issues, and sometimes, physical violence towards teachers, other students, or themselves. We have so programmed students in our schools to learn required facts, regurgitate information, and submit to the orderly culture that they often remain and live in the passive, closed mind-set that becomes deeply ingrained in them after their formal schooling is finished. We have commodified knowledge by our incessant focus on the mechanistic, and have inoculated our students with apathy instead of the dynamic, lively search for expression and action. We are creating laborers that will blindly follow and produce without question as to why, or who benefits, or how it may be detrimental to their way and quality of life. These mindless practices are so ingrained in our students that after a child has spent 13 or more years in our mandatory educational institutions, mindlessness has become a way of life. As long as one upholds minimum attendance records, and shows minimal “academic progress,” one earns a diploma, declaring them “educated.” In reality, students who appear successful within the educational arena have only mastered a very narrow set of skills that only prove they are adept at jumping unrelated and insignificant academic hurdles, as I did. Our society needs to understand that the current education received by its participants is not broad, and is not geared towards acquiring a basic set of skills, which the proponents of a standardized education promote, but is one that rewards complacency, submissiveness, and blind acceptance of the knowledge that is doled out to them.

It is no wonder students are incapable of linking knowledge to real life situations, or critically solving simple, everyday problems in life.

Many students are not motivated to learn, and if they are, this motivation is choked out of them, and disappears by the time they reach upper elementary or middle school. The worth of young individuals has been devalued and the imaginative have been discouraged. Many intelligent, talented students in public education are lost, and lives never fully developed, because of the impersonal structure and ambiguous aims of education. Those pegged as dropouts, misfits, and rebels are often highly intelligent, passionate, and creative individuals who simply do not fit into the narrow box that is organized education today. The current banking system of education (Freire, 1970/2008) results in a death of true learning and its joys. Isolating students from each other and the teacher only tends to shut down capabilities and imaginations, which are crucial to developing each individual's intellectual capacity for critical thought. We are all born with vast potential, yet the opportunity to fully develop this intellect is only available to a select few. Our schools and the structure of our society perpetuate this tragedy in all classes, races, and genders. Our system rewards conventional and comfortable traditions that perpetuate the domination of one group over another. Any form of domination exhibited on one group over another group inhibits the freedom and expression of the enslaved. Paulo Freire (1970/2008) states, "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression...It interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human" (p. 55).

Macedo (2006) exposes these critical issues by discussing the ways in which our schools perpetuate such injustices, which are rooted in colonialism, and continue to reproduce the same dominating characteristics in our social structures, ignoring the diversity in students and teachers that may exist. Just as the sorting hat in *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling placed individuals in their proper “house,” the testing and banking system of today sorts and places students in their “proper” place in society. The disconnectedness and divisions of knowledge within the curriculum serve to deaden the mind from integrative and creative imaginings. “What is at stake here is our ability as democratic citizens and thinking beings to see through the obvious contradictions and discern myth from reality. However, our level of critical consciousness is being rapidly eroded” (Macedo, 2006, p. 29). Although the current push towards standardizing the curriculum at the national level is justified by implying that all students educated within our nation will emerge from schooling with equal knowledge and skills, in reality, this act of standardization reduces both equality and democracy in our society. Students do not arrive at school straight from a factory mold. They do not arrive with the same set of knowledge, talents, aspirations, intelligences, or experiences, but most Americans, being products of the same system themselves, do not even question the trend towards national standardization. They accept and submit their children to it without further examination or critical analysis. When we act in such a manner, we are freely giving our children over to the power of the policymakers that create and implement reforms that perpetuate injustices in our schools and

our society. Every sector involved in public schools is concerned with one thing: the giving or taking of power from one entity to another.

With such popular buzzwords heard in education today such as critical thinking, shared learning, and peer interaction, one is still hard-pressed to find a classroom where collaborative reflection and creative problem solving fill the majority of the day, as opposed to teacher-directed lessons. The underlying structure that silences the thoughts and arguments within dominates, and “the academic habit of evading conflict helps obscure the life of the mind” (Graff, 2003, p. 13). Because students are encouraged and rewarded for submissive, non-confrontational behavior, and learn through the school culture that to question, oppose, or assert their viewpoints is seen as an act of rebellion, punishable by disciplinary action, they learn not to question the power of authority, or be inquisitive. Allowing students safe intellectual spaces to question, explore, and challenge current practices is paramount in leading individuals to “challenge the world around them so as to expand and deepen its democratic possibilities” (Giroux, 2010, p. 496). The administrative demands on teachers to follow the prescribed curriculum, keep order, and increase test scores act as a means of control over the teacher’s professional judgment, autonomy, and ability to draw from and create dialogue, or dialectic forms of inquiry in the classroom. The classrooms of today reflect the past as well as the present authoritative nature of our culture. Our social structures reward individualism and competition more than critical discourse and justice. Students exist in a void, detached and disinterested in the world around them, immersed in themselves. They are often encouraged to

participate in an amoral culture of technology, which isolates and removes them from meaningful relationships with teachers or peers. They are discouraged from examining the world they live in, questioning the status quo, or imagining something better; a life more ethical, and moral. There is no room for examining and engaging in issues that would resemble what real life outside the classroom is. To be successful in this hegemonic environment, students must learn to be rule-followers rather than independent thinkers. “Formal authority supplants moral authority and rule following trumps ethical reflection” (Ayers, 2004, p. 17). We tout ourselves as being a free and democratic society, but upon closer examination, there is little democracy modeled or practiced in our schools. Such practices that encourage students to blindly follow, rather than critically reflect, are what motivated the writing of Graff’s text, *Clueless in Academe*.

By examining the life of students and teachers inside Taylor Ridge Elementary, I hope it may help others to see more clearly the grave societal and structural issues such as these that contribute to the unjust and immoral pedagogy currently operating in many of today’s schools. Ayers (1997, p. 8) quotes Maxine Greene as accurately expressing how I feel when she said, it is as if there exists internally “An expression of a desire to play some part in breaking through the rigid structures, the exclusions, the constraints that prevent people from envisaging possibility.”

Policymakers, educators, and the public are blindingly deficient in the knowledge of how our institutions perpetuate the inadequacies and failures of the nation to prepare all youth to live a caring, critical, and compassionate life.

Michelle Fine calls for teachers and students to strive together to “...collaborate critically across generations, histories, life circumstances, and politics to create curricula and pedagogies that seek to transform institutions not by reproducing or resting the practices of oppression but by confronting the institution on intellectual grounds” (1992, p. 95). Educators must explore and question their circumstances, and seek new answers and new ways of looking at the challenges they face. This is a call to question, to examine, and to challenge.

It is stated that research in curriculum studies should “challenge existing social forces that hurt or hinder people’s full development” (He & Phillion, 2008, p. xi). The federal and state laws of our land demand the right of every individual to have access to a free and equal education that promotes the democratic ideals of the nation. Have we, as a society, reached a place of fair democracy for all? I posit there are many social and political practices embedded in and practiced in our social structures, in our public institutions, and in both public and private spaces, which undermine this goal, and therefore operate to perpetuate rather than alleviate social injustices. The political forces that believe and act upon the presumption that mandating a standardized curricula minus adequate funding will provide a “level playing field” for all students do not seem to recognize that this presumption has not worked to eradicate inequality, but rather has perpetuated, and even increased it. Educational scholars and educators today face a great responsibility to work towards eradicating inequality and promoting social justice for all; therefore, if we are truly a democratic society, education should have as one of its main goals, to be transformative.

As educators, we have a great responsibility to society to expose inequalities and injustices occurring daily in the experiences of both the students and teachers in public education. These injustices come at the hand of many entities. Social goals should embrace a strong desire to assure that none should be a slave to political, social, or historical influences. We should not be enslaved to corporate entities. We should not be enslaved to capitalistic or business entities. Education instead should be a place where motivation, interest, desire, risk, passion, and pleasure thrive. It is imperative that we begin to question how much and what kind of learning actually takes place in our classrooms on a day-to-day basis. What benefits and what disadvantages do our students experience as they progress through the public education system? What is the aim and purpose of public education in our society? Who benefits and who suffers from the current structures and practices present in educational systems today? Most educators rarely (if ever) reflect upon such questions, but educators should be given the space and forum to continuously address such critical questions if we expect more just and positive outcomes within our schools and our society. Paulo Freire (1998) illuminates this by writing the following:

Insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world, I cannot hope to escape my ethical responsibility for my action in the world. If I am a pure product of genetic, cultural, or class determination I have no responsibility for my action in the world...of course this assumption of responsibility does not mean that we are not conditioned genetically, culturally and socially. It means that we know ourselves to be *conditioned* but not *determined*. It

means recognizing that history is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined- that the future is *problematic* and not already decided, fatalistically. (p. 26)

This statement from Freire encourages us to move from being onlookers and searchers of truth to being a participator in emancipatory action. The structure and function of the current academic curriculum serves to perpetuate oppressions and presumptions of individuals within the social force of public schools.

“Educators are de-skilled when the wisdom and judgment that they acquire through experience and study is sidelined, as they are forced into implementing a plethora of specific requirements developed by someone else” (Sleeter, 2003, p. 23). It is urgent that we face these issues as a society and as a nation, which are perpetuated within the very structures and functions of the institutions, which our most formidable minds habituate on a daily basis. We need more “Train[ing] up a child in the way he should go (and in keeping with his individual gift or bent), and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:5-7, Amplified Bible), and less of the mindless rituals and routines practiced today. Practices that have the child’s personal potential and development in mind should begin with the youngest student, and should continue through all levels of education. Early educational experiences should include and recreate such societal goals as the promotion of critical thinking, creativity, and caring, and encourage individuals within their areas of strength. School should be a place where “Students are framed as curious and purposeful learners whose inquiries begin with their own interests and questions. The curriculum is a meeting ground for intellectual

exploration within and across established disciplines and intellectual work of scholarly forbears” (Sleeter, 2003. P. 22). The learning experiences taking place in schools should not end with a piece of paper declaring competence in “schooling,” but should begin with the very young and continue throughout life. It is not a common practice in schools for students to be encouraged in independent thinking. “As an intellectual, you are the one who can choose between actively representing the truth to the best of your ability [and] passively allowing a patron or authority to direct you” (Said, 1994, p. 121). Instead, schooling teaches students to be passive and submissive to authority. Based on an ideology of equality and freedom, learning should be emancipatory in nature. The current structure and basic function of our classrooms duplicates the hierarchy of power present within our political and social systems, and has changed very little since the inception of compulsory schools in America. This system produces very few intelligent intellectuals inspired to act upon society in order to improve life for all. Instead, it serves to create either individuals that fall into mindless work that only profits someone else, or individuals that become highly competitive, who profit only for themselves. Our system also acts to hush the voice of dissent, and discredit those who challenge. Education and learning should stimulate movement “away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and comfortable” (Said, 1994, p. 63). Young students enter school full of enthusiasm and joy for learning and being. Once they have learned “their place”

in the structure, much of this enthusiasm is quickly choked out of the learner. The ideal setting, as Ayers (2004) describes, would be this:

Together students and teachers explore, inquire, investigate, search, ask questions, criticize, make connections, draw tentative conclusions, pose problems, act, seek the truth, name this and that phenomenon, circle back, plunge forward, reconsider, gather steam, pause, reflect, re-imagine, wonder, build, assert themselves, listen carefully, speak, and so on. (p. 42)

Purpel (1989) states that “The development of critical and imaginative capacities is absolutely critical to an educational program of liberation, justice, and love- they represent both conditions for and results of, such a program” (p. 128). Our minds can be a great source of creativity, if given the opportunity. Our institutions only tap into and use a small portion of this infinite creativity. Another effect of the stifling traditions perpetuated in schools today is the suppression of our natural creativity.

In order for tradition to hand over creative potential, or an open future, it needs to remember otherwise- to transmit not codified or programmed content, but the ground of creative tradition itself, which such codification can tend to close off... the indeterminacy, openness, and creative potential of the neotenic, of the human whose nature is to have no nature, whose definition is to elude definition. (Carlson, 2008, p. 202)

Schools mimic society, and the lack of authentic freedom and creative thinking is apparent in both. The capitalistic model in place is turning out “products” (students) who lack individualistic potential and creative thinking. We,

as a society, must change our ideology at its very core, of what is important in education in order to meet the challenges of humanity that we now face. Lake encourages us to realize that our educational system must stop “Favoring practices that “crank out” standardized thinking and homogeneity” (Lake, 2013, p. 68). Carlson’s work also reflects Freire’s observations brought forth in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire’s premise concerning the effective education and success of students also reflects the notion of walking and learning alongside the student, as opposed to the “banking system” of education, the preferred method of education over the past centuries. “The students-- no longer docile listeners--are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re- considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (1970/2008, p. 81). This break from the codified traditions presently operable in education would be a more appropriate aim of education that may help to encourage the unlimited, unrealized potential of many of our students. Our whole system of education could begin a transformation towards a more humane and just society if more educators and politicians were to consider and practice such ideas.

Even though I know that the material, social, political, cultural, and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves usually generate divisions that make difficult the construction of our ideals of change and transformation, I know that the obstacles are not eternal. (Freire, 1998, p. 55)

This statement brings us hope that the injustices, divisions, and obstacles many students and teachers encounter in what is the experience of formal, as well as informal education, are surmountable. Current practices in education often serve to harm rather than help human development. Do we have the desire, or even the ability to question? To reflect? To imagine? To be an agent of change? To examine, search, and criticize is to begin a process of change for the better. Open dialogue is the foundation for change. It is also a risky business.

In the larger society, we have this pyramid of power that has intersecting axes of oppression. People are located in various places within the pyramid of power depending on the various identities that they bring, who they are, and how they are constructed socially within a complex web of power relations. From my point of view, talking about and studying these issues may help people to link their own oppression with somebody else's whose background is different from theirs (Sleeter, 2011, p. 70).

Who among us is willing to take that risk and break the silence? The stories I write reflect upon the many intersecting issues of power and identity, and how those issues play out in daily school occurrences. By illustrating the unjust practices that teachers and students are subjected to due to white hegemony, along with other issues of domination and control, we may more intimately view, and perhaps gain a better understanding of, the hindrances that our present structures generate that obstruct a free and democratic education for our students.

The World is White

While presenting a fifth Grade lesson on the persecution of the Jews during the reign of Hitler, I was showing a film clip on religious diversity which related to a piece of literature we had been reading. During the course of the film, a picture representing Jesus flashed across the screen. The image showed a man with very dark skin. My students turned in their seats, nervously glancing at each other. Several students turned to me with shocked expressions on their faces. Some began to giggle. I had obviously missed something, since I did not understand their reaction. I paused the film and questioned them; “What is wrong?” The students instantly responded, “Jesus is black.” I finally realized that the class was disturbed at the image of Jesus having dark skin. In their eyes, the image was a misrepresentation. The image embedded in their minds of what Jesus looked like did not match the image of a dark-skinned white Jesus, which they encountered in the viewing of the film. To them, Jesus was obviously white, just as they were white, and the film’s image of Jesus was just wrong.

What does it mean to be white? What is white identity? Richard Dyer (1997) says it is everything and nothing in its ordinariness. Being white, to people who are white, is simply being normal, raceless, and colorless. To those who are not white, it means something very different. One who is not perceived as being white is “different,” or considered the “other.” Peter McLaren (1998) describes whiteness most eloquently in *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*.

Whiteness is a sociohistorical form of consciousness, given birth at the nexus of capitalism, colonial rule, and the emergent relationships among dominant and subordinate groups... Whiteness constitutes and demarcates ideas, feelings, knowledges, social practices, cultural formations, and systems of intelligibility that are identified with or attributed to white people and which are invested in by white people as “white.” Whiteness is also a refusal to acknowledge how white people are implicated in certain social relations of privilege and relations of domination and subordination. Whiteness, then, can be considered as a form of social amnesia associated with certain modes of subjectivity within particular social sites considered normative. (p. 282)

Whiteness encompasses a blindness to white as a race that is subject to its own particular identity and social standing. Having been raised in the “white” Southern tradition, I am a product of this collective social construct of whiteness. I have been molded by the invisible privilege I have experienced because of the color of my skin. Because I was raised exclusively white, whiteness is my “normal” frame of reference. I never considered myself as prejudiced, or thought of myself as a racist. Because of the segregated and racialized society in which I grew up, in which I was educated, and in which I now live and work, I now realize that I am a part of the institutionalized racism that grants Whites unearned privilege in a culture that acts upon the assumption that “white” is the ‘normal’ race.

As a student, I attended all-white schools and grew up in white neighborhoods. I have only taught in predominantly, and usually exclusively, white schools and communities during my career in education. My work and my social environments have always been, and remain, very segregated. This is also true of the children and parents in the school in which I work. “For many European–Americans, being middle class is partly defined by not being black. The absence of African-Americans is what makes a neighborhood a “decent place to live” (Apple, 2001, p. 157). Being surrounded by nothing but whiteness, this white identity was fostered within me as a young child as I was brought up in the midst of racial tension in the 1960’s and 1970’s. I always perceived the racial tension and violence to be “somewhere else,” away from my immediate experience, and I was sheltered from it, cocooned in a white world. I knew from a young age that that judging people by the color of their skin was morally and ethically wrong, but, at the same time, lived a life that was void of color. I have come to a beginning realization that such constructs exist and rule within myself and those within the community in which I live and work. Through the study of critical white theorists, seeing and acknowledging such issues are only the beginning of changes within me, and social changes in race relations in the South. My white dominated world has kept the privilege that I have experienced hidden from my conscience. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins describe my plight:

What you know frames how you behave and how you think about yourself and others. If what you know is wrong because it is based on exclusionary

thought, you are likely to act in exclusionary ways, thereby reproducing the racism...of society. This may not be because you are intentionally racist; it may simply be because you do not know any better (2007, p. 5).

Historically, the population within the schools and surrounding communities in this area of the South, which are the subject of this research, is, and has been predominantly white for generations. The culture is void of color, and, as I have been, is ignorant of the roots of racism that permeate the area. Whiteness and all that it encompasses, such as supremacy, hegemony, privilege, class differences, patriarchy, and racism, are deeply rooted in the generations born and raised in North Georgia and Southeastern Tennessee. The difficulty in raising awareness of the systemic issues of whiteness and privilege in this area lies in the fact that whiteness and privilege is not abnormal, but a normal part of everyday life. Whiteness is the hegemonic standard by which people in this area live.

Spending most of their time with other white people, whites do not see much of the realities of the lives of Americans of color nor encounter their viewpoint in any depth. Nor do they really want to, since those viewpoints would challenge practices and beliefs that benefit white people (Sleeter, 1993, p. 168).

The students and residents in the community cannot consider the advantages and privileges they have simply because of the color of their skin, because they are simply not aware of their own whiteness. There is no conscious awareness that their communities are racially divisive. Since no racial diversity exists in the area and it is not a conscious reality to the people, there are no efforts

to examine inequality or segregation, invite change, or to witness or experience diversity. No one questions why it has been, and continues to be an exclusively white school and community. The administration, faculty, and staff of the school are all white. There are no other ethnicities represented. Over 98% of the student population is white, and has been white since inception. Only white males and females hold the county's political and administrative positions, with the exception of one black woman whose roots are foreign rather than local. No personal identity representations for black students or parents exist within the school or community. Both are virtually void of black representation or leadership. "Publicly we do not acknowledge racial tensions; however, they drive most of what we do, what we think about, and what we avoid because it is all part of Southern history" (Callejo-Pérez, 2013, 48). Unacknowledged evidence of whiteness and white power are observable and occur all across the South, just as sexism manifests itself in this area. Separatist practices are evident in religious groups, educational settings, political beliefs, who we befriend, and where we live and play. Noguera could have been writing about this community when he wrote this about race:

It is seen as a political category created largely for the purpose of justifying exploitation and oppression.... For many years to come, race will undoubtedly continue to be a significant source of demarcation within the U.S. population. For many of us, it will continue to shape where we live, pray, go to school, and socialize (2008, p. 16).

If you drive through the Northwest Georgia area, you are sure to come across a concrete statue of “Little Black Sambo” somewhere along a rural road. Blacks attempting to move into predominantly white subdivisions face possible estrangement and disapproval because of their race. White teenagers identify themselves as Southerners by hailing the confederate flag, and yes, you will hear the song, “Sweet Home, Alabama” blaring from cars and people professing, “The South will rise again!” Time appears to stand still in the South where race is concerned. Although there are no accounts of racially motivated violence against the minimal population of Blacks in the small community of Taylor Ridge, there are active chapters of the Ku Klux Klan in and around North Georgia that do occasionally make the six o’clock news, albeit the organization is always portrayed in a professional, civilized manner.

The South, though not unique in its struggle with racial injustice, has provided the main stage on which Americans have played out this fundamental performance of race construction. Whiteness’s contradictory, simultaneous need for race to be both recognized (blackness) and unacknowledged (Whiteness) has been more apparent and well defined in the South than in any other American region. Precisely because its “color line” has been drawn so clearly, because its dramas have been so violent and so graphic, and because –ultimately and tragically –it has profoundly shaped national conceptions of cultural difference, it is the place where one must look to understand the historical geography of this most modern and deeply entrenched aspect of racialization (Hoelscher, 2003, p. 662).

Children immersed in the dominant white environment, as I was, naturally evolve cloaked in their own white identity, and do not possess any awareness of their position of privilege until they are old enough to observe and question differences in skin color, status, or acceptance. As this occurs, typically, either a conditioned responses of fear, or a feeling of superiority, or both towards anything different from self becomes evident and forthcoming within the psyche. For those of a different ethnicity than white, the demographics alone are reason enough to view the community as a hostile environment. Most people living in the area, however, would be offended if someone suggested they might possibly be separatists, or if accusations of racism, segregation, or supremacy occurred. The typical response would be declaring that one is “Colorblind,” that they do not see or consider race. “ Color-blind racism is a new form of racism in which dominant groups assume that race no longer matters-even when individual and group well-being is still strongly determined by race” (Anderson & Collins, 2007, p. 68).

The fact remains that this has been, and continues to be a community where those of other races and cultures are excluded, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Tochluk (2010) describes this perpetuation of a monoculture a generational phenomena known as historical memory. “Historical memory refers to the way the past is in evidence in the present and requires attention for the sake of our future” (p. 258). It is self-evident that generation after generation within the community has handed down separatist beliefs and attitudes towards other ethnicities. The obvious absence of diversity within the community speaks volumes, if one has ears to hear. Tochluk (2010) could easily be describing the

Taylor Ridge community when she states, “There are still large areas of our country where segregated social circles are the norm and our undigested history of oppression remains a significant barrier to cross-race relationship building” (p. 98). Living in such an area has blinded me from recognizing white privilege and domination within myself. The lack of diversity here also hinders any progress towards challenging the dominant embodiment of whiteness.

Since the colonization of America, the white race has acted upon the precept that white man’s intelligence and ways of life are superior to other races. My favorite and most enlightening writing explaining whiteness comes from a short essay written by Peggy McIntosh (1989), in which she brilliantly refers to this phenomenon as the invisible knapsack. “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 1). This “knapsack mentality” of superiority and privilege has led to the exploitation and destruction of indigenous populations across the globe. The white European imperialists came to conquer and colonize any nation or race, which interfered with what they believed to be their inherent right to acquire land and resources, as they desired. Believing themselves to be superior and more civilized than other cultures and races, they proceeded to conquer, destroy, and enslave the cultures and lands they encountered as they went about expanding their interests. “This deep investment in Western ways of knowing seems understandable not because the west is better than the rest, but because for so long the myth of inherent greatness of whiteness has been with us” (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 50). This patriarchal, dogmatic lifestyle has infiltrated

American society in every way. Most people of European descent are either oblivious to this fact, or refuse to acknowledge it.

Nowhere is the distinction between Black and White races made so clear as in the South. The presumption that individuals categorized as white are superior to those categorized as black is characterized by the multitude of injustices that have occurred throughout history in the South towards blacks. The writings of Lillian Smith shocked and stirred me, as she addressed race issues between whites and blacks in the South. Her fictional novel, *Strange Fruit* made me sickeningly aware of the horrid inhumanities and enslavements, which blacks endured during the mid 20th century in Georgia. Accurately reflecting the reality of her day, Smith wove graphic descriptions of hate and fury that separated the black and white races into the characters and storyline of her novel. The barbaric phenomena of lynching, as described in her book, continued to be practiced through the mid 20th century in the South; this and many other despicable actions, all justified by the white man's Christian religion. "I know it's wrong to kill a man, no matter what his color. I know you got to be fair to him. But you can't make a negro your social equal!" (1944, p. 239). Until reading her writings, racism, and the cruelty to blacks during and after slavery was only something I briefly read in history books, or occasionally witnessed on the news. What Smith wrote in the 1940's still holds true today. "There have always been thousands of dissenters whose voices are muffled... few have continued to move forward even as the majority turned backward. But few of these have authority; and few exert real leadership: their way is blocked" (1949/1961, p. 223). Today, the way

remains blocked for ethnicities other than white, and the voices of those who suffer remain muffled in areas such as the small communities in North Georgia.

Her vivid descriptions of events in rural Georgia surround a forbidden and secret interracial relationship between an attractive young woman who is a black servant from “colored town,” and the white son of a prominent doctor in the community in whose home she was employed in as domestic help. Her descriptions of the geographical divisions of races in the novel are exactly as it was when, as a child; I would visit my grandparents in Mississippi. The color of your skin, and your economic status dictated, literally, which side of the railroad tracks you lived on. Since I attended a public school, I did not understand why my cousin in Lambert went to a private academy until I became an adult, and realized that the public school population in their town was all black, which explained why she attended a private school. The white population in that small town did not associate with blacks. No one discussed the fact that blacks lived there, or that they had their own separate schools. The topic was simply ignored, and they lived as if the issue of race did not exist. In one impressionable passage from *Strange Fruit*, the town preacher, speaking to the young white man involved in the relationship states, “You have to keep pushing them back across that nigger line. Keep pushing! That’s right. Kind of like it is with a dog. You have a dog, seems right human...it’s the same. God made the white race for a great purpose” (1944, p. 59).

Although nearly a century had passed between the end of the civil war and the publishing of her book, *Strange Fruit* met with much outrage and controversy.

Because the fictional novel reflected and uncovered unspoken realities of the inhumane treatment, which blacks suffered at the hands of “good, Christian people,” communities banned her work. At that time in history, the Civil War had granted the Black race freedom from slavery. However, Blacks remain enslaved, as illustrated by Smith’s works, by the hegemonic social, political, and economic structures of the South, as well as the multitude of injustices inflicted on blacks for decades afterward. “In Smith’s view, racial, gender, and religious orthodoxy had sustained the South’s stifling and emotionally destructive social order from one generation to another” (Cobb, 2005, p. 195).

Through the decades, our Southern society has continued to deny people of color the simple, basic freedoms of life, inhumanely treated them, and degraded them. Forced by Jim Crow laws and regulations, blacks were constrained to live in separate areas and worship in separate churches. They were not welcome at local lunch counters. They were told where to sit when using public transportation, and even restricted to separate bathroom facilities. Black individuals and organizations pushed back by filing cases in the courts of our nation concerning discriminatory practices and segregation in educational institutions from primary schools to institutions of higher learning. All the while, now as it was then, “We whites have a color glaze on our imaginations that makes it hard to feel with the people we have segregated ourselves from” (Smith, 1949/1961, p. 69). While Smith describes a “color glaze” over whites, W.E.B. DuBois (1903/1998) speaks of the “veil” of separation he felt as a young boy growing up in Massachusetts when he came to realize others defined him as

different, or inferior. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1998), one of his earlier works, DuBois coined the phrase “double consciousness” (p. 9), in which he attempts to illustrate the dual life-view that people of color endure; the view of themselves from within, and the view that others see of them. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” DuBois illuminates pressing issues of how being black and living in a society in which one is constantly negatively racialized in so many public arenas creates major conflict within oneself. DuBois did not necessarily advocate for all blacks, however. He believed that “The paths of peace winding between honest toil and dignified manhood call for the guidance of skilled thinkers, the loving, reverent comradeship between the black lowly and the black men emancipated by training and culture” (p. 102). In his view, it was the educated few that would act as emancipators for the “lowly.”

Many of our popular, modern, American movies, novels, and other literary and artistic works contain stereotypes and objectifications of the black race. These racialized instances are historically and presently common in American literature, film, sports, and arts. Even typical every day expressions we use in casual conversation contain derogatory references to those who are black. As an example, light is frequently categorized as being positive and darkness as being negative. White is typically a representation of purity, whereas black is often representational of the stained or impure (Dyer, 1997). Idioms used in conversation such as blackball, black market, lily-white, white knight, and black

sheep reveal underlying connotations that white is superior to black. Both Dyer and Morrison discuss how white and black are characterized in various media. White subjects, being a member of the dominant culture, are typically characterized as wise, strong, powerful, pure, bringers of light and life. In contrast, black personas are usually shrouded in images of stupidity, barbaric actions, sexually promiscuous behavior, and are regarded as harboring and manifesting darkness and evil. Author Toni Morrison describes historical and modern day examples of how American Literature has acted as a catalyst to manipulate thought and perpetuate these stereotypical images of blacks and whites. In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison communicates to us how “Images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable...Whiteness, alone is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (p. 59). She describes these divisional metaphors as “expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than “race” ever was” (p. 63). Constantly repeated and gone unchallenged, this subtle imagery has infiltrated American society through all major medias. Tochluk (2010) states,

Stories are told from a cultural point of view. White culture pervades all stories featuring predominately-white casts. The desire to see people who reflect one's own cultural values has massive implications for the entertainment industry and links to critiques that white adults for the most

part only watch shows featuring people of color if they are exemplifying white norms (p. 127).

Dyer (1997) reiterates this by pointing out that in the media, the white male is often represented as the savior, the one who has the answer, the superior one.

The colonialist structure of the heroes' relation to the native is...he sorts out the problems of people who cannot sort things out for themselves. This is the role in which the Western nations liked to cast themselves in relation to their former colonies. (p. 156)

Those of African American descent, however, typically view (and experience) this role as one of dominating oppression and terrorism. These generalities breed separation and fear. bell hooks, in *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination* (1992), states; "All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" (p. 175). Whites do not have the burden of walking in fear that they may be ostracized, turned down for employment or a loan, stigmatized, threatened, hated, or worse because of the color of their skin. They do not experience anxiety over the fact that they may possibly encounter terrorizing experiences in the daily course of their lives. Their white skin typically privileges and protects them from being antagonized or denounced in public. Blacks live with the possibility that they may come face to face with these incidences every day. "They [Whites] do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as

representing goodness ” (hooks, 1992, p. 169). Experiencing constant apprehension over possible reproach is foreign to those within the dominant, white society. Faced with evidence that supports terrorizing incidences of Blacks, the typical reaction from White people is often that of denial or rebuke. Being white, or being part of the “normal” culture means living free from this type of fear, free from oppression, free from degradation, and free from judgment based on the color of your skin. Along with hooks, Dyer (1997) also describes whites as representing terror and death. “The image of the Ku Klux Klan decked out in white is an image of the bringing of death” (p. 209). Although the overt practices of discriminatory behavior towards people of color are obvious, other occurrences of racism are not so black and white, but continue to cut deep, and wound the individuals on the receiving end.

Being white means being a part of “the society,” protected from racist attitudes, and a member of the dominant culture, as opposed to being on the perimeter. Richard Dyer (1997) states: “The USA is of course a highly multiracial society but the idea of being an American has long sat uneasily with ideas of being any other color than white” (p. 149). Whites often normalize their race as the dominant American race. They see America as “white” America, although our country consists of a multitude of races and cultures, and always has. These are deeply embedded ideals, which perpetuate racism within our culture. Racial categorization has long been a part of the American tradition, particularly in the South. Sometimes, overcoming the dilemmas in society caused by the division of races seems an insurmountable feat.

Institutionalized societal oppressions have handicapped the creativity, individualism, and intelligence of the categorized and codified youth of today. The dogma present in Southern culture, such as patriarchy, oppression, and discrimination, play a big role in the continuance of these problems. Although Southern schools are not exempt from the laws of anti-racism, the culture in which they exist and operate in remains institutionally discriminatory. “From the segregation of the first half of this century racism now tends to hide in institutional policies, policies which pretend to be racially neutral but in their repudiation of affirmative action function to discriminate against African-Americans” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 350). The discriminatory practices within Southern schools often remain hidden. The alienation of people of color from schools and communities scattered all across the South serve as prime reminders of this, along with outcomes and effects of educational policy on non-whites. Although many educational policies have been created and implemented in an attempt to “close the achievement gap” between students of different races and ethnicities, academic achievement opportunities and outcomes reveal that these policies and practices have been ineffective.

Race inequity and racism are central features of the education system.

These are neither aberrant nor accidental phenomena that will be ironed out in time; they are fundamental characteristics of the system. It is in this sense that education policy is an act of white supremacy. (Gillborn, 2005)

Oftentimes, preceding a major social change in a society, a declaration of some “new” truth will surface. A stripping of the commonly held truth within the

daily practices of that society's reality occurs. Challenging majority views often launch public outcries in the form of uprisings, protests, and sometimes, even war. New ideologies may spread through the media, educational institutions, or through established religious organizations. Typically, the first institutional experience most children in America participate in is compensatory public education. The leaders within these institutions have a major responsibility to nurture a shift towards humane attitudes and practices of young students towards all of humanity. Humankind has bred cultural divisions wherever they have inhabited the earth. What must occur for these divisions within our culture to begin breaking down, and eventually vanish? Tochluk (2010) states: "My relentless hope comes in part from my recognition of the limitless creative potential within each of us" (p. 243). We possess the possibility of limitless potential in all our relationships, including our relationships with those different from ourselves. Ending the obfuscation of the issue through denial is the first step towards change. The alienation of one race from another has continued through our historical memory and is perpetuated by the dominating culture of white colonization. Each individual making a conscious effort to reach out to others, empathize with others, uplift others, and discover the humanity in all must occur in order to address issues of separation, discrimination, privilege, superiority, and inferiority. The silence between the races only serves to sustain the alienation between the races. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in many of his public speeches, "In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Okun (2011) shares that; “privileged resistance is required by a white supremacy culture that relies on the persistent denial of both the existence of racism and the reality that both white individuals and the white group continue to benefit from it” (p. 56). Compared to the magnitude of the issue, there has been little effort through Southern history to examine and expose the divisions of race, and discuss why oppression and segregation still exist. I would posit that it is because the dominant society, either consciously, or unconsciously, continues to suppress such efforts out of fear. Consistently living within a bubble of white identity assures that the concept of “whiteness” remains, and the current balance of power remains with it. It is easy to live in a strong denial that such an identity exists when one is never confronted with the challenge of what it means to live with the reality of their ethnicity, or to be white, and how it may detrimentally affect others. Whiteness allows one to live perpetually in the belief that they are living the “normal” life. When an individual does not recognize their own identity, and the privilege that accompanies it, they also do not recognize that their denial of their white identity comes at a personal cost to other cultures and ethnicities.

To convince someone that there is a systemic problem surrounding whiteness and privilege when, epistemologically, these concepts and practices are a normalcy of everyday experience for a collective group of people is a daunting task. Living in whiteness is living in denial of differences. Our institutions of higher learning must begin to take ethical and critical white studies seriously, and enlightenment must begin to trickle down to our youngest members of humanity.

Peggy McIntosh (2012) states that:

Many contest the idea that seeing privilege is a valid angle of vision and many are unable to use the privilege frame at all because it has not become real to them. Scholars need bravery at this stage in the development of privilege studies to do the work, the teaching, and the scholarship. United States ideology, media, and institutions as a whole still deny that systems of privilege exist and powerfully shape individual identities and societal institutions. (p. 194)

Reconstructing images of whiteness in a society, which has used whiteness as an anchor to categorize and classify all “other” races, is a task that is great before us. The critical issue of whiteness, which is an issue of power, demands an acknowledgement that whiteness is an invented social entity, which comes at a great cost to others. Currently, society simply accepts it as an ordinary state of reality that brings no harm to individuals of other races.

Just as objective social reality exists not by chance, but as the product of human action, so it is not transformed by chance. If humankind produces social reality, then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity. (Freire, 1970/2008, p. 51)

In order for the cultural perception of race and whiteness to be changed, we must challenge what is considered normal and ordinary in the historical and the current consciousness. Deconstructing and reconstructing personal identities and behaviors, which have been affirmed by white society for generations, no doubt, will potentially meet with much resistance. Cornel West (1993) suggests,

“To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American Society--flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes” (p. 3). Part of the problem in the South is the ignorance and/or the unwillingness of the White culture to acknowledge that race issues and imbalances of power still exist. Discussions about race among white Southerners are very complicated conversations consisting of a plethora of differing viewpoints, but these conversations do not typically include personal reflections of white privilege or power. Those who desire to work towards equality in our society and are “equally committed to antiracist curricula and teaching need to place much more of their focus on white identity” (Apple, 2001, p. 207). In his exploration through Southern historical memory, Brundage (2005) writes a rendition of the resistance blacks and whites have encountered from each other while attempting to memorialize the past. He offers this analysis: “If Southerners speak freely, respect difference, deliberate collectively, and reject categorical claims that employ stark oppositions, they may avoid the divisions that have contaminated Southern public life for most of the century and a half” (p. 342). There are myriad examples of the Southern historical accounts being remembered only through the White patriarchal view. These, along with other cultural divisions, create great hurdles for society to overcome if we are ever going to walk in an understanding and appreciation of each other. The white “knapsack of privilege” that McIntosh describes still exists and serves as a catalyst of power and domination in our culture. Within his experience as a teacher of culturally diverse students, James

Jupp (2013) summarizes McIntosh's description of the race-evasive identity many White individuals, including White teachers, have as follows: "The White middle class culture occupies the hegemonic center in the United States through notions of individualism, merit, and success..." (p. 18). Furthering this concept, Jupp, along with Patrick Slattery, expands on studies of White identity by what they coin as "second wave White teacher identity studies." These identity studies "seek to reflect, represent, and proliferate complex and progressive conversations on White teachers' race-visible professional identifications" (201, p. 116). In Jupp's research of the lives of White male teachers, he discovers that they hold both race-evasive and race-visible views of the diverse student population in which they teach. If we, as teachers living and teaching in predominantly White neighborhoods and schools, are to develop identities that are more enlightened and better equipped to teach an ever-increasing culturally diverse population, and, if we, as teachers, are to prepare our students to enter into and participate in a democracy that values and sees justice and fairness towards all members as essential, we must be willing to "seek to reflect, represent, and proliferate complex and progressive conversations on White teachers' race-visible professional identifications" (Jupp, 2013, p. 116). For White teachers in the South, the race issue will not be one that is quickly remedied with enlightened attitudes (Jupp, 2013), but will be one that requires a ceaseless, self-reflective journey that continually allows a teacher/individual to develop a better understanding of their Whiteness in relationship to others' cultural identities.

As long as one culture is privileged by race and unaware of that privilege, other cultures will remain in subordination to that privilege. Unfortunately, although the physical battles of the Civil War are over, the wars and wounds of the South have never been completely resolved and put to rest. Only the future will reveal if the cultural wars that remain within the hearts and attitudes of both Whites and Blacks in communities across the South will ever be settled and come to a complete and final resolution.

CHAPTER 3

PORTRAYAL OF METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

Revealing Realities

I see you, as you want to be seen

I hear you, as you want to be heard

I speak you, as you tell me what to say

I write you, as you give me the words

Through your eyes, your words, your voice

I too, am revealed

(Dixon, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 23)

The current atmosphere in our schools today makes almost no room for the aesthetic research that the above authors call for. To be concerned with artistic expression of events and significance of the sensory and emotional in examining educational practices is of no value to our educational culture which only concerns itself with data, data, data, test scores, test scores, test scores, and research-based, research-based, research-based. In this mindset of data collection is king, and standardization is the holy grail, it is important to sit back, reflect, examine, and explore the effects of a climate saturated in accountability issues such as this, and to think of what is of importance and significance that is actually happening within the walls of our elementary schools. To explore the depths of

emotion and thought that drives the behaviors of teachers and students in classrooms every day is typically of no interest to most people who consider themselves critics of our educational institutions, which includes most everyone. It is very frustrating to hear the rhetoric spoken by the media and in random conversations with both friends and strangers about public education, and to know how far removed the reality is within schools from what the general population imagines. My dissertation inquiry critically explores the marginalization and subjugation that teachers and students endure on a daily basis in today's public schooling, and the structural forces that perpetuate the socio-cultural milieu that exists.

The critical participatory research approach used in creating this portrait borrows from a conglomeration of several methodological approaches. This inquiry embraces elements of teacher lore (Schubert & Ayers, 1992), narrative inquiry and storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008), autobiography and biography (Miller, 2005; Grumet, 1988) and fiction (Barone, 2007; Lather, 1991; Benson & Anderson, 1989; Spring, 2013; Saye, 2002, and Smith, 1944), but has been primarily influenced by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's School portraiture inquiry method. Curriculum researchers who use participatory critical inquiry methods are explained by He (2010).

Practitioner inquirers in the South engage in personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008) that employs ... narrative research method to explore the narratives and

experiences of repressions, suppressions, subjugations, and stereotypes of Southern women, Blacks, and other disenfranchised individuals and groups, and the force of slavery, racism, sexism, classism, religious repression, and other forms of oppression and suppressions on the curriculum in the South (p. 480).

This non-traditional type of social research conducted by an insider helps the reader attempt to make sense of the particular issues of power and justice that practitioners face. It is an invaluable contribution to the reader's understandings of the complex attitudes and perceptions that are expressed during daily interactions that occur in schools. The amalgamation of stories and accompanying commentary will offer to remedy the ignorance of those who are not active participants in elementary schooling on a daily basis, and offer new perspectives and questionings of those who are. With portraiture, as described by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman-Davis (1997), we

Create opportunities for dialogue, we pursue the silences, and in the process, we face ethical dilemmas and a great moral responsibility. This provocative work can disturb the natural rhythms of social reality and encounter. This exciting work can instigate positive and productive change. (p.11)

As I struggle to record and interpret what goes on in the halls and classrooms of an elementary school, I realize what a daunting task it is to attempt to put together years of experiences of others and myself into one document. I feel an enormous weight of responsibility to provide accounts of teachers and students

lived realities, of the triumphs and conflicts that occur in their lives, and offer these accounts up to individual interpretation for the audience of readers. It is my hope that the selections made will accurately mirror the complexities of the actual experiences, and will provide the reader with a reflective and meaningful frame from which to view significant lived experiences inside an elementary school that most individuals never see or hear. As a practitioner and researcher, it is my attempt to, as Pinar (2004) encourages, to “teach not only our students but also their parents, our neighbors, and anyone who will listen. By whatever means, we must continue teaching after the bell rings and students depart our classrooms” (p. 124).

Historical and theoretical ideologies have played a huge role in the structure of our educational system, and their influence still has a significant impact on the lives of students and teachers today. We are a conglomeration of our own personal interpretations of the events that have shaped our lives. As an educator, I have experienced, first as a student, and then as a teacher, how the system of education forces its participants into a liturgy of unproductive and useless rituals. Many of the inhumane practices illustrated in my vignettes only serve the interests of policy makers, and help to line the pocketbooks of publishing companies, politicians, and the cartels of the testing industry. I have based my inquiry into such practices on Lawrence Lightfoot’s methodology of School Portraiture. School Portraiture research seeks to narrate, authentically and aesthetically, the stories of the research subject(s) while it recognizes and welcomes the portraitist’s perspective within the narrative. My goal is to pursue

and reveal a portrayal of the challenges and injustices currently occurring in the field for those both inside (actors) and outside (audience) of the schooling experience.

School portraiture is a method of inquiry having its historical roots in sociology and anthropology, and has developed over the past decades out of narrative studies and traditions. The vignettes presented illustrate the deeply ingrained practices and core issues in an elementary school that work to perpetuate and reproduce injustices that compromise the freedom and future of its inhabitants. Authentic experiences of teachers and students are recreated and interwoven into a fictional setting. The characters and narratives are created from the interwoven characteristics and experiences of many different professionals that live and teach in the North Georgia area. These composite characters and fictional stories are created in a manner that will allow the identity of the subjects and the situations presented to remain anonymous and unrecognizable. The purpose of my inquiry is to create an opening; stories in which the reader is able to place themselves in a context that may otherwise be unavailable and unfamiliar to them, so they may see and hear events as if they were present, and explore the realities that challenge those experiencing life in an elementary school.

School portraiture is a qualitative research methodology, which seeks to capture and illuminate human experience through stories, just as an artist seeks to document experience and interpret nuances and details of a subject posed for a portrait. It seeks to combine art and science, which are the foundations of portraiture methodology, for creating an authentic portrait that documents the

perspectives and experiences of the subjects being studied: the very essence of their experiences within the complex context of their lives. This is a recently defined method of inquiry that is expanding in use within a myriad of social disciplines. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot is recognized as the developer of this research methodology. Together with Hoffmann Davis, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) discusses the desire and purpose for creating school portraiture.

I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words. I wanted to create a narrative that bridged the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature. (p. 4)

Portraiture artistically blends several inquiry methods and takes an interdisciplinary approach to research. It may contain elements of narrative inquiry, case studies, life and oral history, ethnography, and descriptive study. The portraitist, as a researcher, attempts to create an aesthetic whole in narrative form that intertwines and balances the importance of the artist's voice, the subject's voice, (or actor's voice), and the context. In portraiture, "The voice of the audience is joined with the portraitist and his or her subject. Often silent but always present, this third voice further enriches the meaning produced by the blend of the other two voices" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 13). This joining of voices lends itself to rich interpretive meanings for the participants, the artist, and the readers of the portrait. The audience brings their own critical interpretation into the portrait as they examine the social behaviors within the context of the school setting, and extract personal meaning from the experiences presented.

Creating such a rich experience for actor, artist, and audience (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003) lends itself to critical questioning and discussion of social issues, practices, and policies illuminated within the research, and serves to open doors of critical dialogue.

Portraiture methodology seeks for emerging themes, along with dissonant voices, and weaves them together to express and create a vision, or portrait, of experiences in time and place, characterized by the artist's stroke. Portraiture seeks "...to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and the heart" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243). Each reader views the portrait through his/her own theoretical and experiential lens, which results in experiencing the portrait in varied ways. Artist, actor, and audience are exposed to new possibilities as the portraitist seeks to create an authentic representative account of human experience. The portraitist provides new perspectives and insights, which serve to engage, enlighten, and inspire participants and readers to engage in imaginative possibilities for educational practices and contexts.

This method of inquiry interweaves a narrative approach to research with the aesthetic quality of creating portraiture with words. For thousands of years, people have recorded and shared stories of life experiences in many different forms. Ancients used stories to explain phenomena, elders of many cultures confirmed its value by utilizing it to pass down important heritage to predecessors, and artists throughout history have documented significant events by it. Storytelling in its varied forms is a universal way of learning about and understanding our experiences and ourselves. The practice of using stories as an

interpretive research tool is deeply rooted in sociology, ethnography, and anthropology.

There is a long and rich history of dialogue and collaboration between artists and scholars, between novelists and philosophers. In fact, the intersection of fiction and social science has occurred since at least the eighteenth century, when these two approaches to the study of life began to emerge from similar impulses and express common themes. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.5)

Forms of inquiry such as portraiture address today's critical research questions much more adequately than scientific, positivistic studies, and yield more experientially rich and meaningful results. School portraiture seeks to "develop texts that will seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 10). This type of narrative inquiry is a study of human experience. It is a way in which to view and understand individual and social phenomena in diverse cultures. It is a vehicle used to explain differing perspectives in varying circumstances. Portraiture inquiry raises the standard of the importance of expressing inner thought, and the process of making meaning of life experiences. In his book *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles uses his experiences and conversations with his subjects, fictionalizes them, then weaves into them the timeless, classic stories he has experienced in his own life to help us gain a deeper understanding from other individual's experiences. Robert Coles becomes deeply involved in his subject's lives in order to portray exceptional detail in his research. In a conversation

described in *The Call of Stories*, Coles recalls a powerful comment made by William Carlos Williams: “We have to pay the closest attention to what we say...their story, yours, mine- it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (1989, p. 30).

Storytelling may be presented in many different forms, including autobiography/biography, interviews, self-study, fictionalizing authentic experience, journaling, running anecdotal notes, drama, art forms, and participant conversations. Such research may be recorded, shared, or exhibited in a variety of ways; displaying life experiences in order to better understand human behavior in search of deeper truth and understanding.

Portraiture in Practice

After many years of research in the field, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot sought for a better way to portray her research “that might capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). She first used portraiture as a methodology in the early 1980’s. After authoring *The Good High School* in 1983, Lawrence-Lightfoot co-authored an in-depth text on this method of qualitative research with Jessica Hoffman-Davis in 1997 entitled *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. Deeply embedded in the process of portraiture is the art of storytelling. The artist or portraitist carefully listens for dominant, resonant, and resistant voices along with what is unspoken, and takes into account

the nuances of expression and tone, and searches for clues in the context of the setting. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, the goal of the portraitist is:

To document the specifics, the nuance, the detailed description of a thing, a gesture, a voice, an attitude as a way of illuminating more universal patterns. A persistent irony recognized and celebrated by novelists, poets, and playwrights is that as one moves closer to the unique characteristics of a person or a place, one discovers the universal. (2005, p. 11)

Her keynote text outlines the methodological and procedural design of portraiture in a way that assists the novice as well as the experienced researcher in the implementation of a portraitist approach to research. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis's text is an in-depth guide describing aesthetic characteristics of portraiture, emphasizing the importance of context, integrating the diversity of voice, and defining the boundaries of empathy and intimacy. It also instructs how to identify and illustrate the emerging themes and patterns within the research, emphasize the significance of dissonant voices, and gain coherence in sculpting the parts of the story into a coherent whole. The result of research that incorporates portraiture is a rich, descriptive, artistic portrayal, which paints a picture for the reader and lends itself to multiple interpretations, just as a portrait painted on canvas.

In perhaps the most widely referenced article in current literature criticizing school portraiture as a methodology, F. W. English (2000) argues that:

Portraiture lacks in providing truths and objectivity, and leaves no room for the reader to create differing views and opinions of the portrait created.

The resulting *portrait* is a literal, encompassing, and stable *truth*. And that truth is singular, unequivocal, and transcendent. By *transcendent* what is meant is that the summative portrait is beyond reproach. It isn't that the reader cannot form alternative opinions; rather, it is that the reader has no actual means to do so (p. 22).

In her text, Lawrence-Lightfoot addresses this issue by explaining that it is an acceptable and welcome fact that the portraitist and the audience have individual and differing ideologies from which to view the portrait. The portraitist's, or artist's view is not only welcome but encouraged in the creation of the portrait, in that it serves to inspire the audience to question their own ideas and paradigms as they read, opening up new and divergent avenues of dialogue. Also discussed in the text is the importance of realizing that this research methodology carefully describes the historical and present significance of the context of place and time, and that "context is a dynamic framework-changing and evolving, shaping and being shaped by the actors" (1997, p. 59). This does not indicate a fixed, stable framework, which is beyond reproach, as English suggests. The portrait created by this methodology welcomes and encourages the reader to self-examine and question as she/he reads the rich descriptions of experience created by the portraitist. Most criticisms leveled at school portraiture as a qualitative methodology compare it with the manner in which qualitative research was conducted in the past, reverting to a comparison of methodologies from different moments in history. In the past, qualitative methods modeled positivist scientific inquiry. Some researchers considered this a time of stagnation within qualitative

research. We are now in a new era of qualitative research. “There have never been so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, or methods of analysis for researchers to draw upon and utilize” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 29). The scant criticism of portraiture encountered within the current literature tends to critique out of a positivist, scientific paradigm. Postmodern and poststructuralist purposes and views of qualitative research conflict with those of the past. It is detrimental and unfair to compose a side-by-side comparison and critique. The two inquiry methodologies have different purposes and seek differing outcomes. One type of inquiry is concerned with the ethical and value issues of society, and the other type of inquiry is concerned about proving relationships between controlled variables, and is (supposedly) value free. It is futile to compare apples to oranges. With the exception of this frequently referenced essay, the overwhelming response to school portraiture in today’s educational and research literature is encouraging and positive. “The narrative, like any artistic product, evokes the matter of our humanness along with those vexing questions involving our definitions of self at the very deepest levels of our capacity to reason and feel” (Cottle, 2002, p. 10). School portraiture aims to challenge our preconceived paradigms. It can provide a deeper understanding of the daily complexities of life in schools. Portraiture gives outsiders a glimpse inside the daily rituals and routines of the actors within the context, and allows for personal reflection and questioning of why the actors perform as they do. We have a great need for theory and research in curriculum to begin to uncover and challenge the current emphasis on data and quantitative accountability in our educational system, and assist our

schools in moving away from mundane and meaningless rituals and towards the important and meaningful implications of life. School portraiture is an excellent research methodology capable of exploring and enhancing our understanding of the current systems of education, its problems, pitfalls, and successes.

Sharing for Social Justice

It is important to me that “Emancipatory, critical social science must be premised upon the development of research approaches which empower those involved to change as well as understand the world” (Lather, 1991, p. 3). The valuable experiences of teachers and students within the walls of our elementary schools are rarely portrayed or narrated, much less pursued. To reveal these experiences without fear and without restraint may lead to a deeper understanding of some of the crippling issues in our schools. Portraiture may be used as one vehicle to open dialogue that may lead to a more just and equitable educational society. “Our aim as researcher-storytellers is not to seek certainty about correct perspectives on educational phenomena but to raise significant questions about prevailing policy and practice that enrich an ongoing conversation” (Barone, 2007, p. 467). The portrait may assist in informing others in a more experiential way, and is an avenue to portray a more realistic view of the experiences of others within their personal and professional context. Re-presenting the feel of an elementary school experience that is not typically viewed as significant is addressed through stories that shed light on the many daily occurrences that have

a great and lasting impact on the lives of our teachers and our young students. The resulting narratives pay particular attention to the conversations, attitudes, goals, and meanings behind the actions of the actors, and helps the artist in presenting a rich, meaningful experience for the audience.

Auto/biographical research are an essential contribution to the practical knowledge needed by policy makers to make beneficial decisions related to the curriculum of our schools. We have shown that it has a sound epistemological basis, when it is presented critically and reflexively, and with attention paid to how far it is truthful and valid: accurate, sincere, representative. (Griffiths & Macleod, 2008, p. 139)

Authenticity is an integral part of portraiture and naturally occurs when following the portraitist's research methodology. The author of portraiture does not battle with objectivity, but examines and interprets finding through her own subjective lenses. The researcher's own interpretations of the stories are welcomed and willingly revealed within the portrait, and are considered valuable to the study. This gives the reader a place of questioning. Thomas E. Barone, a great contributor and noted researcher and scholar of narrative storytelling methodologies, is concerned that researchers have little influence in the educational setting, in policymaking, and in the public's view of curriculum and curriculum policy. Barone calls for researchers in curriculum studies to engage in more "critical storytelling in educational inquiry-for the purpose of enlisting more allies to support those who work in schools" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 574). The authors of *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar et al., 1995) see great potential in the

aesthetic use of storytelling in helping to create uncontested spaces for dialogue in curriculum. Speaking of Barone's study of the aesthetics of curriculum, they say: "His proposal to incorporate narrative into aesthetic understanding of curriculum will be significant for the field" (p. 575). Bottery, Ping, Wright, and Ngai (2009), after conducting research on educational leadership using portraiture research, also show their support for storytelling through portraiture in the following comments: "It recognises that the core of educational activity and achievement are not visions, strategies or processes, but people. It provides a space where individuals can reflect upon themselves and their unique contributions to the educational process" (2009, p. 95). Heather Harding (2005) also comments on the successes of her research, which incorporated the use of portraiture to expand the personal identity of a white educator of black urban students. Harding states: "Unveiling the stories and experiences that shape our work is one way to lay bare the construction of inequality in our schools" (p. 78). These are examples of how researchers have used portraiture to promote freedom and justice to marginalized populations. Djanna Hill's research (2005) interprets three black women educator's experiences.

Creating poetic portraits allowed me to convey the spirit of their beings in a way that other, more traditional, forms of data documentation would not enable. As teacher-scholars, we must think of and charter nontraditional ways of data documentation. We will then influence a wider audience. (p. 104)

These published research studies reflect on how using narrative school portraiture may serve to glean deep meaning from everyday experience, and provide an avenue of expression for the oppressive practices students and teachers experience. “In portraiture, our ability to provoke readers, participants, and ourselves into reevaluating our respective points of view is a small but meaningful form of social justice” (Chapman, 2005, p. 159). It is my desire to provide an opportunity for the actors’ voices to be heard, and share experience with the reader in a way that might inspire new educational practices that are more conducive to much needed social change.

Collecting and Representing Lived Experiences

Portraiture methodology naturally lends itself to exploring critical issues, and is an excellent way to extend an inside view to a larger audience outside academe. Policymakers, the public and sometimes even educators themselves are blindingly deficient in the knowledge of how our institutions perpetuate the inadequacies and failures of the nation to prepare our youth to live a caring, critical, and compassionate life. The everyday culture of the elementary school is far removed from what is currently represented in society, in the media, and in political circles, yet most individuals take these contemporary representations, intermingled with personal experiences, and view them as a realistic representation of what goes on in schools. One cannot have a practical understanding of today’s school culture unless they are a current participant in it. I

want to open the doors of Taylor Ridge Elementary and bring a glimpse of the elementary school culture to others. My passion is to give both educators and non-educators an opportunity to see the day-to-day occurrences that make up the experiences of teachers and students that are not obvious to the outsider looking in. I hope that my writings will reveal new meanings to the reader that will inspire them to reflect upon their own theories, experiences, and practices and to identify current trends and ideologies that are detrimental to the development of the full potential of our youth, and the promotion of a fair and just democracy.

In order for one to understand another's perceptions of personal experience and ways of knowing, it is important that we question what we assume we know, and what the media portrays as truth, and search deeper under the surface and take heed of a variety of experiences. The result may be the gaining of a different perspective of predominantly white, rural schools in the South. To create the portrait, I collected data by observing events occurring during the school day in classrooms, the teachers' lounge, lunchroom, in grade level and faculty meetings, and other school functions and events. I then used a voice recorder to create a digital "journal" of the scenarios. I created digital files of what I narrated while observing interactions between teachers, students, parents, other school personnel, and administration. I noted my thoughts, reactions, and emotions along with the observable reactions and emotions of others in the setting. I also recorded personal reflections of experiences that other teachers and parents shared with me. The digital recordings aided in noting my own memory that presented itself as relevant to the study, along with recognizing and recalling

emotions, reactions, and bias that may have occurred. I regularly downloaded and transcribed the recordings into a digital print format.

I also collected hard and digital copies of relevant documents, such as in-service and faculty meeting agendas, announcements, school and district handbooks, inter office emails, training and workshop agendas, grade level meeting minutes, RTI (response to intervention) meeting minutes, grade level and school newsletters, school and district event calendars, parent communication, memos, committee meeting minutes and parent conference minutes. Also included in the collection were significant photos, letters, autobiographical journal writings, e-mails, memos, and other artifacts.

As the gathered data was reviewed, the resulting characters and events were intertwined, fictionalized, and fashioned into a collection of stories. The resulting portrait describes teachers' and students' evocative experiences in the contemporary school culture. Observable information such as body language, tone, voice inflection, emotion, and other pertinent knowledge is illustrated as stories unfold in the fictional setting of Taylor Ridge Elementary School. The recorded observations and notes collected serve to add credibility to the research. Triangulation is "...projected as a strategy that will help the researcher assert that her data interpretations are credible. She will have ways of showing that she got the participants' real views and authentic behavior" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 221). This type of authenticity of experience is a driving aim of the study. As Denzin and Lincoln state, "The qualitative researcher refuses to be limited; as Flick (1998) has recently observed, the qualitative researcher uses various

techniques and rigorous and tested procedures in working to capture the nuance and complexity of the social situation under study” (2003, p. 49). The digital recordings and transcripts of the stories and events evolving from shared and remembered experiences were combined and are acted out by fictionalized composite characters in order to protect the actors’ anonymity, to respect their privacy, and ensure the willingness of the participants to share private information openly. The composite characters and fictionalized stories are based on the experiences that I, and others in the elementary school setting, have had, experiences that I have observed, and that fellow teachers have experienced and shared with me over the course of decades of cumulative public school teaching. The fictionalization aids in ensuring the authenticity of the narratives. Using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s directive, in the final portrait, an actor’s voice “becomes one of the many that are taken together and represented selectively throughout the narrative” (1997, p. 173).

It is important to remember that our views and emotions are ever changing, and are reflective of the state of mind and stage of life we exist in during the present moment in time (Carr, 1986). In looking back at what classrooms were like at the inception of compulsory schools, and comparing it to what exists today in classrooms, it appears that the changes that have taken place are overwhelmingly detrimental to individuals who inhabit our schools every day. Today, issues such as overcrowded classrooms, nationally standardized curriculums that focus on increased test scores, constant and repeated testing and

evaluation, and overburdened and silenced teachers and students are aggressively pushing any excitement or love for true learning out of our schools.

By creating a work of fiction based on real stories and events, using both autobiographical and personal narratives, I hope to closely examine and share the consequential challenges and struggles that students and teachers endure in our public schools. These challenges have been overshadowed by the drive of political and commercial establishments to “increase achievement” in public schools. The vignettes presented in this project are purposefully left up to the reader’s interpretive discretion. The experiences have been sorted, blended, and retold through fictional characters that have been crafted from a multitude of students and teachers that inhabit the elementary schools where I have worked. Although the vignettes are accurate representations of school life, personal circumstances, situations, personality characteristics, ages, grades, and life experiences have been changed or altered, refashioned and transformed to protect the identities of the participants, and to create anonymous and confidential stories that are not identifiable. The stories are presented so that the reader may consider that other, perhaps more pressing concerns exist besides increasing test scores, and should be considered when examining the outcomes of education.

Using school portraiture as a methodology has enormous potential to unveil and challenge popular stereotypical paradigms presently accepted within the public and political arena. If we, as curriculum scholars, desire to effect valid and meaningful change in the curriculum of our schools and in society, we must begin to seek out, hear, recognize, and meaningfully reflect upon the voices

within the walls of our educational institutions. We must question the effects which current mandates have on life in our schools, and what current qualitative research unveils as positive alternatives. Portraiture is deeply rooted in important social science research traditions, and stands as a meaningful framework within which to encourage critical reflection and open critical dialogue between author, actors, and audiences. Ayers states, and I agree that “Whatever else we bring to our research, our teaching, and our scholarly enterprises, the core of all our work must be human knowledge and human freedom, both enlightenment and emancipation” (2006, p. 87). It is my desire to explore, and expand my own views and lenses of these areas of critical concern in the curriculum of life as I work towards expanding other’s views and realities, both inside and outside the realm of education.

CHAPTER 4
PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AT
TAYLOR RIDGE ELEMETARY

I present the vignettes in this chapter in an attempt to represent to the reader the significant occurrences that repeat themselves daily in elementary schools. These stories represent the lived reality of many teachers and students in elementary schools across the North Georgia area. It is my hope that we may see the universal connotations of these stories, and gain a richer view of the personal triumphs and tragedies that are experienced daily by many in public schools. Patricia Whang (2012) describes what happens when we are distanced from the lived realities of others. It is important that we do not stand at...

Such great distance from the lived experiences of others – especially those who are negotiating life from dominated social positions – that we remain unaware or have little first hand knowledge of their joys, triumphs, pain, suffering and horror. Knowledge derived from distanced perspectives is necessarily diluted, possibly distorted, and most problematically possibly non-existent. (p. 48)

In an attempt to bring the reader closer to the perspectives of those inside an elementary school, I have chosen to portray representative stories in the following vignettes. May the following stories be a catalyst for critical reflection that may lead the reader to new perspectives, open dialogue, and positive changes. I now

open the heavy double glass doors and allow the reader to enter into the lives of the teachers and students at Taylor Ridge Elementary school.

Bless his poor little heart!

Melanie and Anthony: The Kiss of Death

Here he comes, bless his heart. He is a poor, dirty, ragged thing, isn't he? Looks just as Melanie had imagined after hearing of his enrollment and background. He had a crazy look in his eyes, and the behavior to match. The office had told Melanie yesterday afternoon that Anthony would be a new student in her 5th grade class starting today. He moved in from another rural school in Georgia about 30 miles south of Taylor Ridge. As Melanie warmly greeted him, she could tell he was going to be a handful. He took his assigned seat on row 3, quickly pulled his arms inside the sleeves of his jacket, and retreated into the hood like a turtle, covering all of himself but one eyeball. No amount of coaxing was going to change his position, so Melanie left him alone. By the end of the school day, Anthony was pretending to shoot his classmates with his pointed finger, using his thumb as the trigger. The other students curiously stared at him. Melanie went home, stacks of papers in tow, wondering and worrying about him, and fearful about what might happen tomorrow with him in her class.

Anthony's grandmother had brought him in to enroll him yesterday. She told the office staff that Anthony's dad was in jail, and that his mama had run off a week ago with a new boyfriend. Grandmother didn't know where Anthony's

mother had gone. After learning he had been abandoned, she had gone and picked him up over the weekend. (So, where was Anthony during the last week, I wonder?) Grandmother lived on a very limited income with her grown daughter, who was Anthony's aunt, and the aunt's two sons, both of which were older than Anthony. No one was pleased to have another addition to the household.

Melanie is a veteran teacher of more than 25 years. She already has 29 students in her room, thanks to the lifting of class size restrictions by the Georgia State Department of Education (GADOE) due to funding cuts. A large percentage of her students this year receive special education services. Only a handful of them are considered average students, and six of her students are gifted. One more student just adds another level of complexity to the dynamics of the already-established rituals and routines of her classroom. Melanie is already strapped trying to keep up with the 29 she currently has. How can she take responsibility for another student, especially one with major emotional issues, without losing her sanity! She is already stretched thin trying to meet the needs of the huge group she has. Finding the space to add another body to the already overcrowded room seemed to be an insurmountable issue. Her room is already wall-to-wall bodies! Melanie approaches me at lunch. I can tell she is stressed, and almost in tears.

"I don't think I can do this anymore, Donna. Anthony came with no records, and when I called his previous school, they told me he had no Special Ed. Records, and he had no behavior issues. You can look at him and tell he is disturbed. Normal kids don't act like he does. Mr. Stone has already questioned me about whether or not I plan to evaluate where Anthony falls academically and

behaviorally, and if I plan to bring him to the Student Support Team (SST) and place him on RTI (Response to Intervention). You know what that means...hours of extra work that takes time away from the rest of my students. Time to test, time to fill out paperwork, time to remediate, time to write down minute-by-minute observation of behaviors, time for meeting upon meeting upon meeting about where he functions and how he behaves. I can't keep my head above water with what I already have! How am I supposed to meet this child's needs too? I just can't do it."

I heard later in the day from another teacher that Anthony refused to line up to go to lunch, and Mr. Stone had to physically drag him, kicking and screaming, to his office and call his Grandmother to come get him. So much for Anthony's first day at Taylor Ridge.

A few months later, I caught Melanie walking towards her classroom after school.

"Melanie, what's going on with Anthony?" I said. She had been making copies for her math lessons tomorrow on algebraic expressions, and gathering up materials to teach about the environmental effects of the great depression. Since the "fruit basket turnover" of teaching assignments last year, (which was becoming the rule rather than the exception the last several years), Melanie, along with many of her fellow teachers, faced the daunting and stressful task of learning and preparing for a whole new set of standards she was unfamiliar with. Her strengths were in the area of Reading and Science. She even held a reading endorsement, an added credential on her teaching certificate, which cost her

precious extra time and money to take the classes to obtain. She related better to and preferred to work with younger students, but she was given no choice in the matter. She was re-assigned to 5th grade for this school year, and she would be teaching Math and Social Studies. With only 40 minutes 4 days a week set aside for “planning,” and most of that consumed by meetings, every minute counted.

“I’m on my way now to a meeting with the RTI team about him. He is beginning to follow some of our routines and rituals, but he still breaks almost every pencil I give him, and he only sporadically completes any assignments. His disruptive behavior in class makes it so hard to teach! The whole class is suffering because of it, but every time I try to talk to Mr. Stone about it, he just asks if I still have a behavior plan in place, and am I following it. It’s been several months now, and he’s still not interacting with any of the other kids. Mr. Stone seems more anxious to keep him in my classroom than he is to help me with discipline issues that arise. I’ve started practicing for THE TEST every day, so I’m trying to cram in as many standards as I can before the testing begins. Otherwise, the kids won’t be prepared, and you know what that means!”

Yes, I know. Low test scores mean a low rating on the new teacher evaluation instrument, Teacher Keys Effectiveness System, or TKES. The new instrument contains ten standards that rate the effectiveness of all teachers. The standards teachers are evaluated on require many observations by administration, meetings after each observation, student input via. surveys, and examining and showing proof of student growth on standardized measures. It all culminates at the end of the school year with a “score” that supposedly rates the teacher’s

effectiveness in the classroom. During in-service days prior to school starting, we had spent hours viewing training videos on the instrument, and were instructed to read the TKES 358 page manual provided by the Georgia Department of Education. (Whoopee!!!) One of the standards reads:

The teacher continually facilitates each student's opportunities to learn by engaging him/her in critical and creative thinking and challenging activities tailored to address individual learning needs and interests.

During Melanie's last "formative assessment," she had received a low mark on this standard. She was very upset. In all her years of teaching, she had never received anything but positive responses on her evaluations. She had even been teacher of the year at one of her previous schools. She had worked long hours, and spent many weekends at home trying to plan lessons that were creative and interesting. She had spent a substantial amount of her own money (much to the chagrin of her husband) to provide materials that she could use to teach hands-on lessons, since the money provided from the school to meet classroom instructional needs barely covered the cost of paper and staples. When her administrator came in to observe her, she had her lesson plans lying out, as she was told to do, so that evidence of using data to plan and customize lessons for different ability levels and learning styles was documentable. She knew that her TKES ratings needed to be a level 3 or 4, or she would face a differentiated improvement plan of her own, and would receive ineffective ratings as a teacher. She feared that Mr. Stone was purposefully giving her low ratings in order to try

to force her to leave, but, being the dedicated teacher that she was, she continued to try to do the best she could with what she had. Her efforts went unnoticed, however, since Mr. Stone seemed to favor the younger, prettier teachers he had chosen to employ when he was first appointed as principal at her school. The more experienced teachers that he “inherited” felt discarded, and pushed to the side. Everyone was aware of the favoritism he showed. Melanie felt as if she was caught between a rock and a hard place. She wanted to do what was best for the children, but it seemed that no matter how hard she tried to do things Mr. Stone’s way, nothing met up to his criteria. The circumstances were not in her favor no matter what she did. Poor Anthony. She had really tried to reach him this year. Now, it was down to crunch time. Whatever bit of the curriculum he had absorbed through osmosis was going to have to do. She had to move on and try to prepare her other 29 students for the test as best she could. It was a necessary evil. The target students, as Mr. Stone called them, who could be coached to make the most gains, must score well. She had to pour the most effort into those students in order to show the highest growth percentage. She felt that she was neglecting both the lower achievers who took too much effort, and the high achievers who would score well anyway. Her job and salary depended on this selective teaching process. Hopefully, all her students would score well. She had furiously covered the whole curriculum before March, so that she would have this time to coach for THE TEST. Her students’ scores would weigh heavily on their futures and academic opportunities. Melanie didn’t want her students to appear academically inept. These scores followed the students along to middle school, and would help

determine their placement in next year's classes, whether they would be placed in low, average, or high academic achievement classes. Not only did THE TEST have significant influence on her own future as an employable teacher, but it also would affect her students' futures. Melanie was really feeling the pressure. She had been at this school for ten years, and did not want to leave. However, if she were to be forced out of her position, (probably to make room for another new, younger teacher Mr. Stone had in mind) maybe another school would consider employing her if she could show that the majority of her students had made progress this year on THE TEST.

Melanie's train of thought was interrupted by the blare of the intercom:

"Mrs. Payne wants to see you, Melanie. Can you come to the office during your planning time?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Oh God! What does she want! Melanie thought. The only time they call you to the office is when there is a problem. Melanie didn't know if she could take any more problems today.

"Come on in and sit, Melanie. I'll be off the phone in a minute."

Mrs. Payne was the assistant principal. Many of the teachers really got along well with her, and when they felt like they were getting nowhere with Mr. Stone, they would approach Mrs. Payne. She was usually a good listener, and tried to support her teachers as best she could, but she had little influence as an administrator and often walked a chalk line with Mr. Stone. She was a tall, thin woman with beautiful short wispy silver hair, and a quick wit. Her background

was in business, and she had returned to college and obtained her leadership degree later in life, so she had never actually taught in a classroom before. Since she had no practical experience, she went strictly by the book. She actually seemed a little fearful around the children, as if she might catch some disease if they were to touch or hug her. Although she had a good rapport with most of the teachers and was a willing listener, taking action was not her forte. She would attempt to discuss issues with Mr. Stone, but would quickly back down if he showed his disapproval. The state standards and guidelines were her bible.

“Melanie, you have been a valuable asset at Taylor Ridge for many years. I see how hard you work, and how dedicated you are to your career. I appreciate what you do every day in the classroom.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Payne,” Melanie said.

“I wanted you to know, though, that Mr. Stone has been approached by several parents of students in your class the last few weeks. They have voiced concerns about the safety of their children while in your class.”

“What kind of safety issues?” Melanie inquired.

“As an example, one student came home yesterday with lead in his hand because he said another student had stabbed him with a pencil.”

Melanie had no idea what Mrs. Payne was talking about. No one had told her of any such incident yesterday in class. The kids usually have no trouble tattling on one another. She continued to listen.

“And one of the parents, who is a PTO officer, told another fifth grade teacher that her daughter came home one day, and she had a huge gap cut out of

the back of her hair. Another student had lobbed off a chunk of her long blonde hair, and she had come home crying about it. She told her mother that it had happened at school in your class.”

“What? I had no idea!”

“Yes, there have been a few more reports I won’t go into, but you know safety is our primary concern here at school. If the students do not feel safe, they will not be able to learn. I am concerned that these incidents are happening right under your nose, and you knew nothing about them. How did you react when they happened?”

“No children ever reported any of these issues to me. I knew nothing about them!”

“Melanie, I know you are under extreme pressure this year. I know how hard it is to manage a class of that size, and you have so many needy students that depend on you. I want to help you, but I’m not sure what I can do. There is a group of parents that have approached Mr. Stone about the incidences, and they are very angry. They’re actually demanding your removal from the classroom. Personally, I think this is a bit extreme, but that is what has happened. I am so sorry you are having to go through this, and right here before TESTING. I want to help, but I don’t know how much influence I have at this point. Mr. Stone is very upset that our school is getting called up on what they say is negligence in the classroom, and he is fearful that the news media will get wind of this. The last thing Mr. Stone wants is for our school to be smeared on the six o’clock edition of

the news. I hope this doesn't escalate into a fiasco, because it could result in a suspension for you."

"Suspension? Mrs. Payne! No one even told me any of this was going on in my room. No students reported it, and no parents called to question me about it. Mr. Stone hasn't informed me that parents had contacted him about this. I knew nothing! I certainly would not allow this had I known it was going on!" Melanie tried to hold her composure. She couldn't believe what was happening. "You know I love my kids. You know I would do anything to assure their success and safety. I am devastated. I don't know what's going on here. I don't know what to say!"

"Well, I just wanted to give you a heads up. If any of these parents choose to contact the Board of Education, Mr. Stone will be forced to meet with them. I just wish you had been aware, but I understand it is hard to keep an eye on all 29 of those students at the same time. I will do what I can to help."

"Mrs. Payne, I feel that this is very unfair to me. What is happening? How can I be disciplined about something I knew nothing about?"

"That is why, Melanie. Because you were not aware, and the students suffered under your watch. Like I said, I will do what I can, but I just wanted to warn you ahead of time. You had better go now, your class will be returning to the room soon. Please go home and get some rest tonight, Melanie. I have a feeling you will need your strength tomorrow, and in the coming days."

Melanie walked back down to her room in a daze. The children slowly drifted back into the classroom, some of them softly singing the new melody they

had been learning in music class. Her group of silly girls, whom she affectionately referred to as “her three stooges,” entered last, minus one of the girls. Sara trailed behind, and as she entered the room, Melanie sensed something was wrong. With no time to pull Sara aside, she made a mental note to question Sara later. Melanie proceeded with her last lesson of the day, and passed out what graded work and handouts she had had time to file in the weekly communication folders before she was called into the office. The children began to pack up for the afternoon announcements and dismissal. In the confusion, she discreetly motioned for Sara to come over to her desk so she could talk to her.

“Sara, is everything ok? You seemed a little off when you came back from music.”

‘I’m fine.’

“Are you sure? Is there anything you need to talk to me about?”

“No.” Sara stared at her feet and began fidgeting. Her eyes filled up with tears.

“Sara, talk to me,” Melanie spoke quietly.

“I can’t.”

“Sara, I am here to help you. Please. You can’t go home like this. I will worry about you!”

Sara smiled and giggled as she wiped her cheek. Melanie handed her a tissue. The first bus loaders were called, and about half the class bolted out the door. Sara’s face turned serious again. One of her friends walked over to them and saw Sara crying.

“Tell her. If you don’t, I will,” her friend commented.

“Tell me what? Sara, I want to help you.”

“Well, he said if I tattled, that he would do something worse to me next time.”

Melanie felt anger rising in her. Who had hurt and threatened Sara? What had happened?

“No one will hurt you; I will make sure of it, Sara. Now, what happened?”

“Well, we were in music class, and I had to go to the bathroom. When I came out to wash my hands, Anthony was there. He had a fork from the cafeteria in his hand, and he ran over to me, pulled up my skirt, and stabbed me in the leg with it. (Sara pulled her skirt up to show Melanie the scratches on her leg.) I started pushing him away, and he just laughed. I told him I was going to tell. He came up really close to my face and he said if I did, that next time, he would stick it in my eye. Then he spit on me. It scared me so much, I ran back into the bathroom. When I knew he was gone, I went back to the sink, wiped myself off and went back to music. I’m staying away from him! If he ever finds out I told he will be after me again! He scares me.”

Hmmm. Melanie began to wonder, was the violence the other children had experienced at Anthony’s hands too? If so, the victims were probably terrified to tell on him. She could see it now. When the children went home and the parents discovered the injuries, they were extremely upset and angry, probably went straight to the principal, and then started talking with other parents about what had happened. The talk among parents probably encouraged the confession of similar

tales, and the posse was then formed and rallied around a common cause. Now that she thought she had figured out what had happened, Melanie hoped that she could convince Mr. Stone that she was not negligent, and get this straightened out.

But, what if Mr. Stone wouldn't listen? What if he just told her that she should have known what was going on in her classroom? She could not help the fact that the children were afraid to tell her. What if he took this as an opportunity to write her up for negligence? What if the other students were not as willing as Sara was to name the perpetrator? Mr. Stone obviously did not have a lot of regard or respect for her years of experience or teaching ability. He was probably more concerned about his own standing in the community. It would make him look bad as an administrator if the parents and community believed that he was not willing to take action at "his" school when students were getting hurt on a regular basis. Mr. Stone had made it clear earlier in the year that until the RTI process was complete and Melanie could document the behavior issues and finish the extensive referral and evaluation process, which could take months, Anthony would be hers to deal with. Anthony's next RTI meeting was a week and a half away, and her professional reputation, and maybe even her career, was hinging on how the students rated her as a teacher on the student evaluation, and how they scored on THE TEST. With the children in constant fear of another student in the room, an emotionally troubled student that she was getting no help with, and their parents speaking against her at home and in the community, and the test looming in the near future, her hopes of having high test scores and positive student

evaluations were slipping away. She could see low ratings on more of the TKES standards and on her evaluations:

The teacher provides a well-managed, safe, and orderly environment that is conducive to learning and encourages respect for all.

How could Mr. Stone possibly give her a positive rating on this after all these incidences? And how would the students rate her on the student perceptions data rating when they don't feel safe with Anthony in the room? How could they possibly do well on THE TEST with all this controversy swirling about? The possibility of her having a proficient TKES score seemed to be dwindling by the minute. This is not how Melanie expected her last few years in elementary education to turn out!

As Melanie drove home that afternoon, her mind was racing. She imagined having to face the five school board members if no one was willing to listen to her side of the story. Melanie knew that Mr. Stone was close friends with three of the five board members. He went to the same church with two of them, and he went deer hunting with a third member every fall. The other two, another man that was very much a part of the "good ole' boy" system, and the fifth member, the only female member of the board, she wasn't sure about. She did know, though, that the majority would take Mr. Stone's side if this were to be brought up before the board. She prayed her principal would give her a chance to tell what she had discovered the day before, but she knew he was not a very good

listener. What would the other teachers say about her if they knew what kind of trouble she was having? How could this be happening? It all seemed to be such a nightmare! Melanie had always loved her job, and worked hard to be successful at it. All these new evaluation instruments, accountability instruments, rules, standards, and procedures were ridiculous. Now her very career and reputation was on the line. Was it her fault? Where had she gone wrong? Maybe if she had been able to reach Anthony on a more personal level. But she had 29 other students. She felt sorry for Anthony and his situation, and had tried so hard to reach him this year, but his shell was just too hard to crack. So sad, that at such a young age, his situation seemed so hopeless. Maybe if she had been more receptive to his emotional state and the problems he was having. Maybe if she had taken more time to communicate with all her students parents. Maybe she just couldn't handle the demands anymore. Maybe she WAS negligent. Maybe it was time for her to step out. Maybe...

Circumstances are not in Melanie's favor. Where is the justice in all this? Why must she feel as if she has to choose which of her students deserve the bulk of her attention? And why is this damned TEST so important anyway? She has spent so much of her time worrying about teaching what might be on THE TEST that she doesn't have time to explore any issues or subjects the students bring up in class, or show an interest in. Will Melanie's fate end up in the hands of the five board members? If so, their decisions regarding her professional career would be based on what they had heard from other parents and her administrators, and not her past successes. Melanie had gone into teaching because she loved children.

She remained in teaching because she loved children. She was good at what she did. The students loved her. Her fellow teachers sought after her for advice. Many parents would ask her counsel when their children had both academic and personal issues. Melanie played by the book. She stayed late to assure that her lessons fulfilled the latest requirements and were appropriate for her class, and coded to the standards. She was never late, she showed up at every school function, and usually helped out with them in one way or another. She tutored students that needed extra help. She came in on the weekends and worked so she would be prepared for the week. She spent many nights at home grading papers and searching for new lesson ideas. She delivered her lessons with great skill, and she loved to make her kids laugh. Now Melanie faced possible disciplinary action, or worse, removal from her job.

Many social and cultural issues are at work in this situation. Why was this happening to Melanie? One reason is due to the sexist attitudes of our patriarchal society here in the South. She was raised not to question authority, especially the men that were in authority over her. As a good Southern Christian woman, she was taught to be submissive to authority, and obey without question. Melanie's position as an elementary teacher, and a woman, held little respect, and was viewed as a minimally important position in her community. Everyone here expects their child's teacher to care for, nurture, nurse, counsel, and "mother" their students just as they would at home, while their children are at school. More often than not, Melanie and her contemporaries are viewed as surrogate parents and/or babysitters, rather than as professionals with an important job to do. Even

Melanie herself did not recognize her true purpose and value as an educator, but saw herself and her worth reduced to menial, monotonous, meaningless tasks, and her effectiveness as a rating on a rubric. Our public schools are so flooded in systems of accountability that our focus has shifted away from teachers and learners as valuable human beings, and on to raising test scores and teacher ratings; ratings heavily based on how well the students do on standardized tests, and how well the students like their teacher. All the while, the views that our society holds about women, who make up the majority of our elementary teacher population, are still stuck in the 18th and 19th centuries. Students and teachers alike are harassed and frustrated by the constant push to “raise their number.” They are not respected as unique individuals, so their level of respect for each other, their teachers, and the world they live in suffers. Society feeds off negative reports about our school systems, but they ignore reports about large class sizes, the lack of resources, low salaries that have not risen in a decade, and unrealistic and impossible expectations handed down by policy makers who have never stepped foot in a school, much less spent time in a classroom. Melanie has been through so many reforms, she feels as if she is perpetually stuck in a revolving door. The curriculum she is required to teach changes at the whim of whoever has been elected in the latest political race. How many more experienced and talented teachers are being pushed out the door, or are leaving voluntarily because of these vital, yet unresolved issues. How many teachers are being pushed to a breaking point in our elementary schools because so many obstacles are in their way that they cannot possibly fulfill the requirements of the United States Department of

Education (USDOE), such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (R2T), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) initiatives? The Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) and the Local Educational Agency (LEA) also have their own laundry list of school improvement and curricular initiatives, along with other required practices aimed at improving education, such as Georgia's Race to the Top (RT3), Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES), Teacher and Leader Effectiveness System (TLES), Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS), Student Growth Percentiles (SGP), College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS), Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), Georgia Milestones Assessment System, Online Assessment System (OAS), Professional Learning (PL), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), GAPSS (Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards), School Improvement Plan (SIP), Student Support Team (SST), Response to Intervention (RTI), State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), and Positive Behavior Interventions (PBI). Along with these and other mandated practices and reforms are more, just as important but typically unrecognized, responsibilities such as making sure students have had breakfast, answering numerous questions unrelated to the curriculum, refereeing disagreements and fights, taking temperatures, bandaging cuts and scrapes, assuring that everyone has school supplies, calling parents when a child is sick, or they are consistently making low grades. She must also address many issues that come up in the class such as cheating, bullying, death, friendship, cultural differences, and abuse to

name just a few. Sprinkle these responsibilities with the routine responsibilities that occur every day, such as collecting lunch money, ice cream money, snack money, keeping up with fundraisers, picture sales, bus duty, cafeteria duty, recess duty, attendance, attending mandatory meetings, parent conferences, planning lessons in advance for every day of the week that are both capable of capturing the attention of young students all day, and that meet state and federal requirements, delivering and assessing learning for those lessons, and doing it all with enthusiasm and energy. Had enough? Yet, teachers return to their jobs day after day, year after year, and do the same thing over and over, and are never asked for their input on important policy issues, and, in reality, do not even have time to reflect on why they do what they do. Seeking an answer to why this is happening to Melanie requires an untangling and examination of years of social, cultural, and political milieu, which she just doesn't have the time, energy, or motivation to do.

Righteous Anger:

Andrea and Kevin

It's pouring down rain. As I walk into school, barely making it on time, I see Andrea pull into the parking lot. I know she's just dropped her two-year-old daughter off at daycare, and is running late again. I don't know what she's going to do if Blake, her husband, leaves her and moves out. He's not much help to her anyway, but at least he takes the baby to his mother's every morning, and picks

her up in the afternoons. It would be worth it for Andrea to be rid of him, even if she has to be ten minutes late to school every morning! Not sure Mr. Stone would see it that way, though.

Andrea wheels into the parking lot, knowing she will have to face the “timekeeper” again. It’s past 7:30AM, (barely) and Mr. Stone is watching her like a hawk from the front entrance. She gathers up several bags from the passenger seat, opens an umbrella, and makes the wet trek into the building. Mr. Stone greets her as she enters with a smug look on his face.

“Good Morning, Mrs. Brandon.”

She smiles and nods, knowing he is checking his watch. She turns down the hall and walks towards her classroom. As I meet her around the corner, we exchange glances, roll our eyes in silent acknowledgement of the “time Nazi’s” reaction, and head towards our rooms. The students have been released from the gym already, and like a barrel of excited monkeys, just about run us over in the hall on their way to their classrooms.

Andrea and I have taught together for about nine years now. She is a great teacher, and has so much compassion for her kids, but bless her heart; she’ll be late to her own funeral! She opens the door to her classroom with her key and the children begin to file in. They make their lunch choice on the cute magnetic chart Andrea constructed from a cookie sheet this summer and decorated with plastic “food” she found in the toy department at the Dollar Mart. Andrea’s room is filled with creative items such as this that she uses in her daily routines with the kids. She makes most of them herself. She pushes through the excited children and

dumps all her bags, containing graded papers from last night, a book about creative language arts ideas for third graders, her label maker, and her lunch from home onto her desk. Andrea then goes back to the door, stands, and greets each child with a smile as they noisily come through the door, trying to make eye contact with as many students that will allow her. As they file past, Andrea notices the smell of cigarettes on some of their book bags. Another child looks forlorn and lost under the hoodie of his coat, avoiding any kind of contact with anyone. Another stops, bottlenecking traffic, to tell the exciting news from the previous evening at home. The cat had kittens last night under her bed! The students begin putting their book bags away, make their way to their desks, and begin working on their morning work, proof that Andrea has done well teaching them the required “rituals and routines.” The practice of rituals and routines, the latest “buzz-phrase” that we are now all too familiar with at school, is a set of the latest and greatest teaching practices that everyone must implement into their already-full repertoire of teaching techniques. The entire faculty had several hours of training on what rituals and routines are, the difference between the two, and how to implement the procedures into our classrooms.

Andrea and I have had long conversations about how nice it would be if they would just let us alone and we could teach the way we know is appropriate for our own students. It angers us that no one trusts our professional judgment on anything. Cumulatively, we have both spent 16 years taking college and graduate classes learning how to educate our students, yet someone farther up the ladder is always dictating to us what they expect to see when they enter our classroom. If

what they expect is not observable, then we are deemed a “bad” teacher in need of improvement. We are perpetually locked into the latest trend that someone or some company has sold to our board of education, the Georgia Department of Education, or to policymakers. It’s hopeless to try to suggest anything else, or to explain why it doesn’t work for a particular group of students, or a teacher. We have both tried making suggestions and offering our professional opinions so much that we’ve been told that our suggestions are no longer welcome. Like I said, can you say, “Perpetually locked?” At least when our students grow up and enter the work force, they will know what rituals and routines are, what their scores on benchmark tests are, and what standards are important to learn at each grade level so they will pass the TEST! Ha! What a joke.

After everyone is safely inside her classroom and busy at their desk, Andrea then heads back towards her own desk, unpacks her work from the night before, her lunch, and her personal belongings, and turns on her computer so she can take attendance before 8 am, as required. She has 10 minutes to take attendance, collect the lunch count, ice cream money, and picture money, record how everyone is going home that afternoon, check student agendas for notes and parent comments, take up homework, and, oh yeah, there’s a fundraiser going on, can’t forget that. Several children are coughing. One brings medicine up that has to be taken to the office and documented by the nurse, and, once again, Kevin got into a fight on the bus this morning. He has a note to be signed, and must be sent to the office to be disciplined promptly at nine. That’s just great. That’s when Andrea begins her writing mini lesson. She’ll have to find time to reteach the

lesson to him when he returns, so he'll understand the assignment. Yeah, right. Be ready to start class in ten minutes. Mr. Stone believes that's ample time to take care of all the "housekeeping" issues, and get to work. Instructional time is sacred, and must be protected at all times. Just another day in paradise!

This particular year, just like Melanie, Andrea has a classroom full of students who are struggling learners. Four are labeled Special Ed., and 14 are labeled as Early Intervention Program (EIP) students. She has three that have moved in during the year and have attendance and tardy issues. One child in particular comes in late every single morning, if he comes at all. Andrea has encouraged his mom to try to get him here on time because he misses important instructional time. She says she just cannot get him up, and he won't get dressed, that it's a huge fight every day. Some days, I can understand why. So far, the issue has yet to be resolved. Another student Andrea has in her room is currently considered homeless. Somehow, she found out Kevin was living with his mom in an abandoned travel trailer with no electricity and heat. Andrea is working through the school counselor and child agencies to get them the help they need, but the counselor is only at her school two days a week, and she is very hard to reach in between visits because she is swamped with job responsibilities. Andrea estimates that about 40% of her students are on medication for ADHD. She has spent three months now with "her kids." Despite the obstacles and hardships they may have in their lives, Andrea sees great potential in each of her students, and has observed evidence of their intelligence every day in the questions they ask and the things they do. The school files paint a different picture of these students

than Andrea sees. They show struggling students with low standardized test scores, and students that have received much intervention and remediation through the SST and RTI process. Many of them have been referred for Special Education testing, and have struggled in academic areas since kindergarten. Andrea sees her kids through a different set of glasses. She sees young, talented individuals with their own interests. They are all different, but they all have their own strengths.

Mrs. Wall's classroom is one door down, and she and Andrea team-teach together this year. Andrea teaches reading, writing, and social studies, and Mrs. Wall teaches math, and science. A few weeks ago as part of a culminating performance assessment task in math, Mrs. Wall assigned the third grade students a project that had to be completed outside of the classroom in order to show mastery of the algebraic properties of multiplication and division. Mr. Stone requires performance assessments and matching scoring rubrics to be created and utilized by each teacher at the end of every unit taught. The students are rated on their proficiency of the knowledge taught by how they demonstrate that knowledge in their performance assessment task. At the end of this unit, they had to create a picture graph that contained five word problems involving multiplication and division, and show how each problem is solved, using both equations and pictures. They were free to create their end-of-unit assessment in any way they wanted, as long as it met the criteria on the scoring rubric. Kevin, who was Andrea's homeless student, had no way of buying what he needed to complete this activity. Andrea didn't know anything about the project until Mrs.

Wall gave her the rubrics containing the final grades to send home to the parents. She glanced through the stack of rubrics, and spotted Kevin's failing grade. Her heart sank. Kevin had failed. She had seen Kevin at work on his math homework, and some of the other math activities he had been assigned. He was a whiz at math. This made no sense. Knowing she was in for a battle, she gently brought the subject of the project up to Mrs. Wall during lunch.

"Mrs. Wall, I sent home the rubrics you had scored on the math assessment task, and noticed that Kevin made an F. I was thinking that if you were willing to give him..."

Mrs. Wall interrupted before Andrea could say anything else. "Andrea, I gave that assignment weeks ago and even sent home a letter explaining what it was, how it might be created, along with a copy of the rubric I was using to score it. Kevin made absolutely no effort to..."

"Yes, I understand that you gave the assignment weeks in advance," Andrea blurted out, trying to steer the conversation towards Kevin's ability, "but I know math is an area that Kevin excels in, and I know if he had the help and materials he needed to do the project, he would have completed the task. I don't think his mom could afford to buy what he needed at this point."

Mrs. Wall began waving her hands and shrugging her shoulders. "Well, I spelled out the directions very clearly and told the students that it was a project to be done at home, not at school. I can't change the rules for one child. Who doesn't have a pair of scissors and some glue lying around the house to put something like this together? I called his house two different times and left

messages that he had not turned in a project yet, and that it was a major part of his grade, and not once did I hear back from them, no note in the agenda, no email, no call, nothing. I did my part, Andrea. The parents and students have to take some responsibility for their education too. I can't do it for them.”

Andrea knew this conversation was going nowhere. She was not going to convince Mrs. Wall of anything. Of course, another one of her students, Carrie, had low-average math skills at best, but her project looked like something worthy of a blue ribbon at a math fair! Never mind that it was obvious that her parents undoubtedly were the ones who did most of the work. No way could a third grader be that creative without a lot of help. And of course, she made an A.

Andrea dropped the conversation and continued eating her lunch. She considered taking the issue of the failing grade to Mr. Stone, but decided it would pit her against Mrs. Wall, and she did have to team teach with the lady every day for the rest of the year. Besides, the unspoken rule is that you just don't challenge authority around here. You do as you are told, and you do it with a smile. She didn't want to come across to Mr. Stone as a troublemaker. Besides, she knows she's already on his “bad list” for being 2 minutes (sarcasm inserted) late almost every day. Knowing better to cross the “all powerful Oz,” Andrea decided she might as well drop the issue. How unfair. Kevin, who had a real talent with numbers, made an F, while Carrie, who can barely multiply, much less manipulate numbers with logic, made a glowing A.

The following week, Mrs. Wall sent the completed projects back to Andrea to send home. She passed them out that afternoon, and watched as Kevin

went out the door. Tears filled her eyes as she watched him take the pitiful project made of plain notebook paper, rip it up, and hurl it angrily into the trashcan. *What is this system doing to our children?* Andrea thought to herself. Andrea, full of frustration and anger, called me the night Kevin had received the math grade.

“Can you believe that? She has no sympathy or understanding for what some of these kids live in. You should’ve seen Kevin’s poor little face when he left school today. It was all I could do not to go into a rage and march over to her room and tell her just what I thought about her grading system and her rules. All the hoopla over these performance standards makes me sick. And she said she called his house and left messages. She hasn’t stopped to think that his parents probably aren’t getting those messages!”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Andrea. The kids that have the resources are the ones that make it, and the children that don’t are at such a disadvantage. How long do you think Kevin will last in public schools at this rate? I mean, most of us do all we can to help at this level, but the older they get, the more lost in the system they become unless they are lucky. I was in the office the other day when his mother was here to pick him up because he was sick, and I talked to her about what a smart boy he was. I could tell that she was glad to hear the praise, but all she was worried about was whether child services would take him away from her if they knew how they were living. She is trying to find a job so she can work while Kevin is in school, but she doesn’t have reliable transportation, and has lost two jobs she had in the carpet mills already because

she couldn't make it into work when her car broke down. She was so stressed out!"

"Well, in a perfect world, these kids would have what they needed and wouldn't have to suffer because of their circumstances. I mean, if the goal of NCLB is that every child receives a quality education that is free, and these stupid standards have been put into place to "level the playing field," then why does everything we do result in separating the haves from the have-nots? Mrs. Wall is right about one thing, life just isn't fair," Andrea stated.

"No it isn't. Remember the kid I had a few years ago that failed the CRCT because she had been up all night because her parents got into a huge fight, and they took her daddy to jail? She was an A student, and had to go to summer school and re-take the test because of that incident." I replied.

This reminded Andrea of another student she had. "Yeah, I remember that. Mr. Stone could've cared less about what had happened to her. All he cared about was making sure she took that damn test. Do you remember the cute little boy with the curly blonde hair who I taught when I had that 5th grade class a few years ago? He was not the brightest marker in the box, but his grandmother paid for him to go to that private learning center after school in Chattanooga all year long, and he exceeded the standards on the test that spring. I'll bet that put her back a few thousand dollars!"

"Of course it did! But that doesn't happen for kids like Kevin. They are left to the mercy of the school system." Andrea begins to rant. "We are supposed to take each child, regardless of how they come to us, cram the curriculum down

their throat all year, and then test them for a week in April to assure that they all got everything we delivered. They are all supposed to come out smelling like the same rose after the test. How ridiculous! What is required of us as educators has nothing to do with the reality of our lives or our students' lives. Nothing to do with what is best for kids. It all boils down to which textbook company, test publisher, or software company convinces the GADOE that they have the answer to their achievement issues, and who can sell our LEA on the "best practices" of the moment, so they can stick us in some crazy professional learning class to learn something that we will have to prove we're using in our classrooms, only to be replaced by something new in a year or two. What hogwash!"

"Andrea, calm down! I feel your pain, and I totally agree with everything you have said. You've got to calm down if you're going to be able to sleep tonight! Listen, we have an early morning to face tomorrow, and Mr. Stone announced this afternoon that he was beginning his TKES walkthrough observations this week, so you had better finish up what you have to do to be ready for tomorrow and go to bed!"

"You're right, Donna. No sense in getting all upset over something you have no control over. At least when I lay my head down every night, I know I've done the best I can for my kids under the circumstances. That's all anyone can do, I guess. See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Andrea."

As I hung up the phone, the thought occurred to me that maybe there were two types of teachers in the world. One type who concerned themselves with the

business and busyness of education, and the other who concerned themselves with the relationships and the responsibilities those relationships place on you as an individual. Andrea most definitely fell in the latter category. And I suppose I do too.

RTI Mania: No, You May Not Read.

Michelle and Jessica

“Oh Michelle, just give it up. I had Jessica last year, and taught her mother a hundred years ago. Put your efforts where they will pay off. No sense trying to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear!”

Michelle stood in the hall flabbergasted. She couldn’t believe what she had just heard from Ms. Leyland. What happened to the part in the mission statement that said, “We commit to a comprehensive system of support by addressing the individual needs of each student?” Michelle had been a part of the committee that spent long hours deliberating about exactly how to phrase that sentence, and the others that made it into the mission statement. She was proud to submit the work to the faculty for their approval. Doesn’t it mean anything to anyone around here?

Michelle is a novice teacher with just a few years experience. She is a true professional and takes pride in her work. I have seen Ms. Leyland attack Michelle like this before. I’ve also worked with Jessica, and her brothers, and had many conferences with the mother through the years. Dad is also around, but scarce. He

works a lot and Jessica's mom takes on all household and child-rearing responsibilities by herself. They live in a trailer and exist with very little income, but their basic needs are met. Education is not a high priority for the family, survival is. The brothers were what we call "fragile learners" when they were in elementary school, and Jessica also struggles in her academics. She has made great strides so far this year in Michelle's first grade classroom, and she loves to come to school. Jessica has just learned to read, and Michelle is having a hard time getting her to do any of her other work. She is attempting to read everything in the room, whether it is on her reading level or not. She has stopped turning her math homework in, and will sneak off in a corner with a book during small group math activities. Michelle is thrilled with her enthusiasm and progress, but had to address the slipping math grades with her mother.

The previous school year, Ms. Leyland had begun testing procedures on Jessica to determine if she would qualify for special education. Although she did not feel that Jessica needed special education services, Michelle felt the pressure from Ms. Leyland and Mr. Stone to proceed with the evaluation. As a result of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) revisions in 2006, RTI (response to intervention) data were required to prove that Jessica was making less than adequate progress. As policy required, Michelle scheduled a conference with Jessica's mom, Ms. Leyland, and Mr. Stone to go over Jessica's RTI data.

As soon as the kids were dismissed, Michelle rushed to the conference room, where the meeting was already in progress.

Mrs. Leyland turned around and addressed Michelle as she scooted into the only available seat at the table. “I was just sharing with Jessica’s mom about the data that have to be collected before we can refer for testing. Do you have her latest assessments?”

Michelle dug through her file and pulled out the data points she had been collecting for weeks on Michelle’s math progress.

“If you will look on this chart, when I began the math intervention with Jessica 2 months ago, her first progress monitoring score was a forty-eight. She gradually increased that to a seventy-five in about 6 weeks, which is phenomenal progress. The last two weeks she has dropped back down into the sixties. This drop was also the time when she discovered and fell in love with reading, and she hasn’t had any interest in anything else except that lately. I don’t think there is enough evidence that she is not responding to the intervention to warrant special educational testing yet. Jessica is an enthusiastic learner that is experiencing success. Given time, I think she will be able to achieve on grade level in all subjects. What do you think?” Michelle turned to Jessica’s mom, hoping for a positive response. Before she could speak, Mrs. Leyland began to describe how Jessica performed last year in her class.

“Oh, but she made no progress when I was giving her intervention last year, and since she is still not at benchmark yet, I think she really should be evaluated.”

At that time, Mr. Stone began explaining the testing process and asking if she would agree to have Jessica evaluated. Michelle could tell that they were determined to get their way, so she just sat back and said nothing.

After the meeting, Michelle went straight to Andrea's room. They had talked about Jessica before, so Andrea was familiar with the situation.

"Andrea," Michelle began, "Jessica is not learning disabled! She has a real love of learning, and is doing great, but just needs time to develop at her own pace. I know she's not doing all her math assignments right now, but she's reading like you wouldn't believe. I don't want her labeled and placed in special ed. She does not need the extra help!"

"I know," said Andrea. "I've seen this before. Just because a family has other children that are special ed, and they are lower income and don't fit into our school culture so easily, they want to qualify them for special ed., so if they score low on THE TEST it won't count against the school's overall score as much. It's not about her, it's about numbers."

"But what about the label that will follow her all through school? What about her self-concept? I just hate to think of her being placed in a lower functioning class simply because they believe she must be special ed. because of her families' economic situation. That is not what is best for her. It's actually crazy! They want to label her as Learning Disabled in math because she is too busy reading right now to do her assignments!" Michelle hung her head. "And her mom really doesn't understand what is happening. She simply trusts the school to

make the decisions. She just wants what is best for Jessica, and if she needs to be tested, so be it.”

Remembering a similar situation from the past, Andrea says, “Sometimes, the very person who chooses to advocate for a student is the one who gets cut off from the important decisions. Sometimes, our opinion just doesn’t matter. Ms. Leyland had a student like Jessica a few years ago. She also targeted him, and had him tested. He was a really smart kid, but his mother had unexpectedly died in a car accident the summer before Ms. Leyland had him, and not surprisingly, he did terrible that year in school. She ended up putting him through RTI, and gathered up enough evidence that the psychologist agreed and diagnosed him as a special ed student too. It was a devastating year for him. He became so discouraged that he hated school by the time he was in 5th grade, and dropped out of school the day he turned sixteen. He had no motivation. Nothing was challenging to him, and all his teachers just assumed he couldn’t do regular classroom work because he was special ed., so they just passed him along without paying much attention to him. Decisions like that can change a child’s whole perspective, and it also changes how the teachers who have the child in the future view their abilities. I hate to see Jessica take that same path.”

“I do too” stated Michelle. Discouraged, mad, and grieving for the future of her student, she turned and went back to her classroom to begin the massive pile of paperwork she had to complete in order to make the referral for testing on Jessica. The data collection, the informational sheets, the developmental checklists, and the list went on and on. It would take her about three hours to

complete all the referral paperwork and make all the copies. Today was Thursday and she had until Tuesday to turn it all in. With only 40 minutes planning on Friday, and a meeting planned during Monday's planning time, and remembering that she had no lesson plans written yet for next week, she decided she would have to take the information home and work on it over the weekend. She thought Mr. Stone had hired her because of her ability to relate to children, and her insight into special needs children. Why was he insisting on the referral after she explained her position? Was it true that he only wanted Jessica tested to keep her from affecting the overall CRCT scores of the school? Wow, this is not how Michelle thought she would be treated as a professional. She believed that with her level of education and her expertise areas, her professional opinion would carry more weight. She was beginning to realize that it didn't carry much at all.

That's Just The Way It Is

Justin and the Big Scare

It was a typical Thursday morning at school. My six and seven year olds were trickling in, putting their belongings away, sharpening their pencils, chatting, and a few (as always) pestering each other. As I was trying to get them seated and quiet for the morning announcements, Justin came up to my desk looking very distraught. Justin was one of the few black children that attended Taylor Ridge Elementary School. Actually, he was one of only three this particular school year. He was a sweet kid that everyone liked, with a

mischievous grin. Justin did well in school, and often talked about his family and their outings together, or what they did at church together, as they were a close family, and very active in their church. All the kids in the room liked Justin. He was a popular pick when the children had to choose work partners. This morning, however, Justin's eyes were wide with fear, and he continually shifted and fidgeted his hands, feet, and body as he described to me his version of what had transpired at his home the night before. "I won't be here tomorrow," he kept repeating nervously. Justin told me that he would be moving away and going to another school. Through his fearful mumblings and his darting eyes, I gathered that his mom and dad had been in a fight the night before. Apparently, Justin's dad had hurt his mother's arm in some kind of altercation. Justin kept saying that his dad was being mean, and that he was not doing the right thing. Shocked, because Justin is usually very bubbly and happy, and seemed to have such a stable home life, I asked him to tell me what happened again. It was obvious Justin had not spoken about the incident to anyone else. He had saved everything until he arrived at school, a place where he felt secure. He began gushing with the details of the night before as he interpreted them. His mother had apparently contacted a relative and was planning to take him and his brothers and sisters away and leave home. Justin was afraid his father or another relative might come to pick him up from school and keep him from his mother. He kept repeating that his dad was not doing the right thing, and that he would be moving. Sensing that there may have been some domestic violence involved, I immediately contacted Mr. Stone, and He arrived at my door about five minutes later.

“Mr. Stone,” I began. “Justin has come in very upset this morning and has told me that his father tried to hurt his mother last night. He said he is afraid someone might try to get him from school and take him away from his mother. Justin is usually so happy and easy going. Something drastic has traumatized him. I think we need to be careful who we release Justin to this afternoon, and I’m concerned for his safety once he gets home. I just felt it was something I needed to report to you. Can you please check the situation out for me? This is very abnormal for Justin.”

“Yes, I’ll take care of it,” Mr. Stone assured me.

I waited all day. Mr. Stone never contacted me. As the day lingered on, I began to worry that Justin would be put on the bus and taken home as usual. What if his parents were still fighting? What might he walk into? And what if one of them did try to grab the children and take them away? I had managed to calm Justin down, and he had a decent day at school, considering.

I glanced at the clock, and saw that dismissal would begin in about ten minutes. I still had not heard a word from Mr. Stone yet. I felt that I had waited long enough. Something had to be done before I put Justin on that bus. I had to act. I began repeatedly calling the office until Mr. Stone finally answered his phone. I knew he was in a meeting with someone, but felt that this child’s safety was more important right now, and time was of the essence. I explained to him that I was afraid to send Justin home in fear of what he would be facing. Mr. Stone then quickly put a call into the Department of Family and Children Services (DEFACS), and the social worker who is liaison with our school immediately

called me. She was on her way to another school, and as I tried to quickly brief her on what had happened, she asked me to hold for a minute while she pulled over and wrote the information down. She then took all the details as quickly as I could give them to her, including Justin's address. She said she would try her best to go to his home, or to get someone else out there, but that it may be next week before they could do anything about the situation because the department had been furloughed for tomorrow, and she wasn't sure there would be anyone available to work the case. Knowing the state of emotional turmoil Justin had been in that morning, I pleaded with her to get someone to go. I explained that I didn't know what the situation would be when he got home, and that I feared for his safety. I also explained that there had possibly been violence at the house the night before, and that both parents were apparently threatening to take the children away. She called me back in a few minutes and assured me that since the child apparently had witnessed domestic abuse, they would be able to send someone out to the residence. She told me that if Justin wasn't at school the next morning, I was to immediately let her know.

I quickly called Justin over to my desk. "Justin," I began, "I just talked to a lady that I know who helps kids that are scared. She promised me that someone would go by your house when you get home from school to see if you and your parents need any help." Justin numbly nodded, and walked out the door with terror in his eyes. I did not want to let him go, but I knew I had no choice. I had made sure the authorities had been contacted and that's all I could do.

After dismissal, I approached Mr. Stone in the office and asked if I could talk to him. I dreaded to bring the subject up to him. I already knew that if I were to question him about the situation, he would look upon it as a challenge to his authority. And, I suppose it was.

“Sure, come sit down. What’s the problem?”

“Well, Mr. Stone, I was curious as to why you waited until it was dismissal time to call DEFACS about Justin.”

Mr. Stone looked at me sternly. He did not like to be questioned about his decision. “The only responsibility we have here at school is to assure that the students are safe while they are here. I didn’t wait until dismissal to do something. I informed everyone in the office not to allow the child to be checked out by anyone unless they notified me first. We have no control over what happens when they go home. Half these kids probably go home to that kind of violence every day. Besides, those kinds of people are just like that. We have a lot of them that live further South, down where I do. They fight like that all the time! One minute they are in a war, and the next minute they’re kissing and making up. That’s just the way they are.”

My jaw dropped. I was speechless! Did I really just hear what I thought I had heard? I was not pleased with Mr. Stone’s indifference and prejudice views in the middle of what I considered a very potentially dangerous situation for one of my students. Oh how I wish our school counselor had been there that day. If she had been present, it would have been her that handled the situation instead of Mr. Stone. I know she would not have dismissed my reaction towards the situation as

frivolous, which I felt Mr. Stone had done. He had brushed my fears off as female hysteria and overreaction. I felt devalued. And very mad. I felt that Justin was not valued. I could not believe that someone who purports to have the students' best interest at heart could react in such a callous way when a child's welfare could possibly be at stake. I thought of the many stupid, boring tasks that we complete at school every day, and how important they are made out to be, when our priorities should be the welfare of the students. I walked away, stunned at his reaction towards the whole situation.

The situation with Justin weighed on me from the time he came up to my desk that morning until I fell asleep that night. As I walked in on Friday morning, the children began telling me they hadn't seen Justin, and were worried about him. They kept asking me, have you seen him yet? Is he ok? He said he had to move. Did he move?

I headed towards the classroom door, avoiding eye contact with them. I didn't know how to answer their questions, and was worried sick about the situation myself. I unlocked the door and walked towards my desk. The children flooded into the room after me in one big, tight mass. Eventually, they began stepping back for me to see. It was Justin, standing in the middle of them! They had been hiding him in their midst as a joke. He was grinning from ear to ear. The children had been teasing me, and Justin was in on it. He was back after all! I gave him a big hug, we all cheered, and then I ordered them back to work. Everyone was relieved. Justin was beaming.

After the class settled in, I asked Justin how things had gone at home the day before.

“A lady came out when I got off the bus,” He said. “She talked to me, and she talked to my mom and dad.”

“Was the lady helpful to your mother?” I asked.

“Yes,” he explained, “and she said she would come back again next Tuesday to check on us. Mom and Dad were much nicer last night. They said they were sorry, that I didn’t have to worry.”

“I told you I was going to try to send someone to help, Justin! I’m so glad everything is ok now.”

For once, the system worked! Justin was very relieved, and, despite the 24 hours of anxiety and turmoil, I was finally able to breathe a deep sigh of relief myself. Although it took quite an effort to help Justin and his family, it was well worth the risk of questioning authority in order to get the help Justin and his family needed. I remained in hot water with Mr. Stone for several months over that issue. He never mentioned it again, but I knew that I had overstepped my boundaries when I questioned his actions. However, some things (and all children) are worth the sacrifice we have to make. All children, even “those kind,” as Mr. Stone referred to him as, are valuable, and deserve to be treated with a caring and respectful attitude. And so do their teachers.

Minute by Minute

It is 11 am. For the last three hours, the fourth grade team has been in a meeting with Mr. Stone. The clunky, wooden, child-sized chairs around the long table in the media center are hard and uncomfortable. The team of teachers is feeling as if they have been held captive in the tiny, cramped space, and they were beginning to get tired and hungry. Under the guise of having a day of planning, the principal had arranged for substitutes to teach their classes for the day, so they would be available to meet. He had been speaking to them all morning long. The three fourth grade teachers were under the impression that they were going to have time today to work on grouping students for remediation, discussing unit plans for the next nine weeks, and bringing up issues and discussing possible solutions to the problems they were having with a few of the kids, and this year's schedule. They thought the afternoon would be time for them to catch up individually on planning, grading, and taking care of a few phone calls to parents. That is not what their day had turned out to be. Everyone looked glassy-eyed, and no one was even speaking anymore. The sheer volume of information the principal had laid before them had stupefied the whole group. The responsibilities he had placed on them read like a laundry list: new testing schedules for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Online Assessment System (OAS), and both STAR math and reading computerized tests, all to be completed within the next 3 weeks. He continued with how he wanted standards-based report cards to be created, a review of what must be observable in the classroom during

walkthrough observations, including the components of workshop model teaching he expected them to use in every subject, every day. If that wasn't enough, they also went over the student survey evaluations that were required of every classroom teacher and talked about the weight they carried on teacher evaluation scores, discussed RTI meeting scheduling, and what he required for documentation of parent conferences and how often he expected classroom teachers to have them. The assistant principal then began unrolling new standards, talked about the implementation of school wide writing prompts and when they would be given, what each child's writing portfolio must contain and when the deadline was to have them completed and placed in their permanent file. She then asked why the grade level had failed to submit the last month's weekly newsletters to her that were supposed to go home to parents. With a stern reminder to submit the newsletters to her for approval before they went home with students, she continued with what seemed like a never-ending list of new things to add to their already full plate! And all this BEFORE lunch! They were finally given a break (30 minutes to run and get something from the cafeteria to eat, and to take care of any glitches in their classrooms that had occurred in their absence), and then resumed their meeting in the same manner, with more information piled upon more information, until it was time for school to dismiss. After the meeting, the fourth grade team returned to their respective rooms, not only behind with what they had hoped to accomplish during the day, but now facing a whole new set of tasks laid before them during the meetings.

Mrs. Armstrong spoke first, "When am I supposed to teach?"

“Hey, forget teaching! When am I supposed to eat or sleep?” Ms. Coleman said.

“What’s wrong, ya’ll?” Asked Melanie, as she passed them in the hall on her way to the office.

“Has your grade level had their planning day yet?” Mrs. Larkin asked.

“No, ours is on Monday,” Melanie replied. “Why?”

“Well, hold onto your panties, because you are in for a ride, girl,” Ms. Coleman proceeded to warn her.

They all began speaking at once, telling Melanie what had happened in the planning meeting that day. She sensed their growing frustration and feelings of being overwhelmed. She was excessively familiar with those feelings herself!

As they stood at their doorways in the hall talking about all that had happened in the meeting, they were unaware that Mr. Stone was walking down the hall towards their rooms. Suddenly, Ms. Coleman nudged Mrs. Larkin, who saw him, signaled Mrs. Armstrong and Melanie, and they all, as if in sync, quickly switched their conversation to what they needed to do in their next grade level meeting.

“Well, do you feel better about the direction we’re going in now?” Mr. Stone interrupted them cheerfully.

“Uh, I guess things are a little clearer now,” stammered Mrs. Armstrong. “We’re just trying to wrap our heads around it all and figure out when we can get all this done.”

“What do you mean? You are competent teachers, the best in the county! You should be able to handle this with no problem! You have your planning time during the day, and before and after school. You’ll get it done, I’m sure of it!” he boasted. You could never tell whether Mr. Stone was being serious, or whether he really meant what he said. They all felt uneasy with his comments. Was he being sarcastic?

As he walked on, Mrs. Larkin looked back to make sure he wasn’t within earshot anymore, turned back around and mockingly said, “Yeah, we have PL~EN~TY of time! It’s called PERSONAL time! You’ve never heard of personal time? Oh, well, that’s the time that you teachers are supposed to have to spend with your friends and family, you know, doing fun things, like sleeping late, or going to a movie, or having a cookout? Yeah, that time! You know, it IS Friday afternoon! Why, you’re so dedicated, I’ll bet you’ve given up YOUR personal time to take care of all the demands of your job, haven’t you? And, of course, they pay us so much, well, we are just happy to do it, now, aren’t we, girls? We just love to work on things like that when we’re at home. Can’t do it in the morning if you have cafeteria duty. Can’t do it in the afternoon if you have bus duty. Can’t do it during planning when meetings are already scheduled for you all the time. SOOO, when does it get done, everyone???”

“On our personal time!” everyone chanted in unison.

As they giggled and rolled their eyes at one another, Mrs. Armstrong spoke up. “You know, what would happen if we just refused to do any of this stuff? Ya’ll know that, just like everything else, in a few years, it will be

something completely different, probably with a different administrator. What's all this gonna mean in two years? Five years? Ten years? NOTHING! Absolutely nothing!"

Melanie chimed in, "That's true. I've never looked at it that way. I've always just attempted to do exactly as the administrators told me, no matter what the cost. But, about the time I would feel comfortable with something, someone would come along and decide we needed to change it. When I first started as a teacher, it wasn't quite this bad. We did have some choice on how best to deliver the curriculum to our students, but now, I feel like I have no choice whatsoever. Now, we are told what to teach, how to teach it, and which students we should spend our efforts on, and who we should just consider a loss. Imagine, giving up on a child under the age of ten, and labeling them a loss as an educated human being, and as a member of society at that age. Wow. That's just sad. And stupid!"

Ms. Coleman remembered that Mrs. Armstrong was on the leadership team, which met twice a month to make important decisions about curriculum in the school. "When was the last time your opinion counted in a leadership meeting, Anne?"

"Uh," Mrs. Armstrong stuttered. "I really can't think of any time. Usually, when subjects are brought up, we express our opinions about what would work or not work in the classroom to increase student learning, but, we end up deciding to implement whatever it is that's been brought to the table by Mr. Stone."

"Don't ya'll know we are at the bottom of the food chain?" Mrs. Larkin lamented. "Our opinion doesn't count. We are women educators in an elementary

school in the deep South. Face it, even if we weren't educators, we would be pretty low on the totem pole, simply because of the attitudes about women down here. Look at our board of education. One woman. ONE! All the rest are men from the community that have basically ruled this place for years together. If you want your opinion to count, you might as well move on from here. Run for office, or go work for the GADOE. They don't know what's going on down here in our lowly classrooms, but they sure act like they know exactly what we need."

"You're right. I think Mr. Stone has an attitude about working with so many women. After all, Mr. McGregor is the only male on our whole faculty," Melanie said.

Mrs. Larkin spoke up again. "All this is true, but what can we do about anything here?"

"Seems as if our hands are tied, really." Stated Mrs. Armstrong. "It really is a sad state of affairs, but if we want to keep our jobs, we'll keep our mouths shut and our opinions to ourselves."

With hope in her voice, Ms. Coleman said, "Hey, I heard the other day that a teacher in another state refused to test the children in her room. Said it was not a sound educational practice, and was detrimental to her student's success."

Everyone just stood there with blank looks on their face. Finally, Melanie said, "Good for her."

The four of them stood in silence, each engrossed in their own thoughts. Finally, Mrs. Larkin looked at her watch and said hurriedly, "Holy Crap! It's

already 5:50! I was supposed to pick up my daughter at the middle school 20 minutes ago! I have to take off, girls.”

“Me too”, said Ms. Coleman. “At least we got to talk to each other today. That’s a switch!”

They all turned and went back into their classrooms and gathered up notebooks, papers, and notes from the meeting to take home over the weekend.

“See ya’ll bright and early on Monday!” said Mrs. Larkin as she rushed down the hall.

“Have a good one.” Ms. Coleman shouted back at her.

“Bye, ya’ll. Thanks for warning me about the meeting.” Melanie said, shaking her head.

Mrs. Armstrong walked to her door. Everyone else had left. She turned and went back to her desk and shut off her computer. She sat and looked out at the beautiful rolling hills surrounding Taylor Ridge Elementary School. What a beautiful place, she thought. So expansive, calm, and full of peace. She wished some of that peace and calmness would come to the inside of this building, instead of only staying on the outside. Maybe Ms. Coleman had something there. Maybe if some of them were willing to stand up for what they believed, they could convince others to change some of the practices that cause such turmoil in their own lives and the lives of their students. She began to ponder some of the possible scenarios. A classroom filled with students who loved coming to school because their natural sense of curiosity was stimulated. A year without any standardized tests. How much more time would that give her to actually teach the

kids something? What if she were able to create her own schedule? Instead of receiving a schedule dictating the times she was to teach reading and math, and being held accountable to be teaching that particular subject if administrators popped in, she could integrate those subjects together, and embed her instruction in what the students themselves were interested in. What a novel idea! Actually forming student learning around the students' and their interests and talents! That would solve the problem of getting kids to read! Who wouldn't want to read something they were extremely enthusiastic about!

The ringing of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts. It was her husband. He was used to her being at home and having supper on the table by this time. He was probably wondering why she was so late. She picked up her things, muted her cell phone, and started out of the building. She did not want to lose her train of thought. What would her classroom look like if all the obstacles to true learning were lifted from her? She wondered what some of her colleague's classrooms would be like if they were free to teach the way they wanted to. Well, she knew a few teachers, maybe even Melanie, would probably be lost without someone telling her what to do. But some of the others... oh how different it could be! The images begin to take form in Mrs. Armstrong's mind. She knows that their school and county mantra, "children first" can be seen on banners, websites, and t-shirts throughout the schools in her county, but how many people REALLY know what goes on within the walls of these schools every day? She steps out into the parking lot and starts her car. She has purposefully left all her work behind in her classroom. She knows she will pay for it on Monday morning, but realizes that it

will still be there Monday, probably with a few new requirements added to the never dwindling stack. She loves her students and loves to teach, but hates her job. She feels like a hamster on a spinning wheel. As she begins the long, scenic, peaceful drive up the highway towards her subdivision, she grasps those visions and holds them tight in her heart. She makes a vow to herself that she will find a way to weave a bit of those visions into her class every day. She has to. For her own, and for her student's sake.

These are our stories. They are a representation of the silenced experiences that many teachers and students fear to share publicly. They are written and shared to help others become more critically engaged in transforming the culturally significant and persistent attitudes that are at work to discredit elementary teachers, and to oppress the freedom that education can bring to our children.

Only by breaking the silence can dominated people seek the changes that will lead to their liberation. Social justice in education is a way to break through the silence and start the process of elevating the voices, concerns and accurate representations of dominated people. (Cammarota, 2012, p. 11)

The stories have been written and shared to interrupt the preconceived and unrealistic notions of teachers and education that many members of society have. Although our experiences are unique, common threads such as the commitment to church and family, the ideology of a Southern upbringing, and learned silence and submissiveness unite us. Although our personal stories of how we arrived at such

a career are as different as our fingerprints, we all ended up in the same place. In our struggle to meet the demands of our job, we have forgotten and disregarded the individual, their needs, their convictions, callings, and talents. We should open our eyes, our heart, our minds, and our world to others that are different from ourselves. As a society, we must be prepared to equally serve children of all races, abilities, classes, and cultures. If we critically examine our practices, and ourselves, we will recognize the power structures and hegemony we live in, and we will no longer be able to deny the detrimental effects of them on our society. To reflect on the silenced voices within the elementary school is the beginning of recognizing that change is necessary, and that emancipatory action is needed if we are truly committed to preserving democracy. We need safe spaces that are free from the fear of retribution, where we may acknowledge injustices, raise our voices, and share our lived realities without abandon so that our voices may be heard. Spaces where we feel safe to analyze and critique our experiences freely. Spaces where we are no longer fearful of breaking out of the mold of conformity. The prison door must be opened, and the captives set free. We need to teach mindfully, live mindfully, and trust in humankind and the transformative power of our words.

Although the events, or ones similar to them, are frequently part of a students' and teachers' experiences in schools today, they are rarely exposed or discussed out of context, for fear of retribution or rebuttal. The forces that silence teachers, reduce teachers' and students' value to a number on a page, and perpetuate divisions that create disharmony in our society need to be exposed.

The ultimate goal is that our stories be told and respected as valid evidence that schooling, as it functions today, is destroying individuals, and paralyzing the futures of our young people.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY: DESPAIR AND HOPE

This is an inquiry into the lived experiences of Southern, white, female teachers who teach their overwhelmingly Southern, white student populations in a rural/suburban North Georgia elementary school. I explore the obstacles and challenges they face as they experience the negative and crippling effects of the policies and practices forced upon them in their teaching and learning environments. I draw upon the theoretical works of Dyer (1997), McIntosh (2012), Anderson & Collins (2007), Morrison (1992), Jupp (2013), Sleeter (1993, 2003), Smith (1944, 1949), and hooks (1992) on race and critical white studies; the works of Apple (2001, 2008), McLaren (1998), Foucault (1977), Freire (1970), Ayers (2004, 2006), Giroux (2009, 2010), and Macedo (2006) on critical social justice in education; and Whitlock (2007, 2013), Weiss (2005), Fine (1992, 2005), Villaverde (2008), Tochluk (2010), Miller (1980, 1992), Cobb (2005), Hoelseher (2003), and Walker (1997) on white female identities, Southern identities and cultures.

Methodologically, I borrow from a conglomeration of critical participatory research approaches. School portraiture, defined by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1977) is my primary methodology. The works of Schubert and Ayers (1992) on teacher lore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) on narrative inquiry and storytelling, He and Phillion (2008) on personal~passionate~participatory inquiry, along with elements of auto/biography

(Miller, 2005; Grumet, 1988; Smith, 1944) and fiction (Barone, 2007; Lather, 1991; Benson & Anderson, 1989; Spring, 2013; Saye, 2002; Smith, 1944) are also used to create narratives which are presented using fictionalized composite characters. The actors in the vignettes illustrate every day, common challenges, concerns, occurrences, and real autobiographical and biographical experiences that have been observed and expressed by teachers and students. The resulting fictional stories purposefully aim to represent the rarely represented or published contradictions and constraints that teachers and students at an elementary school express from their personal perspective.

The sources to which educators have traditionally turned for guidance and advice are not likely to move the field of education as far forward as it was once believed they might... A new look at teaching, if there is to be one, seems to require us to move up close to the phenomenon of the teachers world. (Jackson, 1990, p. 159)

This illustrates the central purpose for creating a portrait of life inside an elementary school. It provides an up-close and personal look at the phenomena of typically occurring events that define everyday life inside the school and its classrooms. The narratives represent real, lived experiences of those entangled within the hierarchy of power in public schooling. The study incorporates the views and experiences of educators and students at the elementary level, which is a rarely explored venue. Although the research project encompasses a narrow context, the experiences address issues commonly expressed by many other

elementary school teachers and students living and working in schooling environments today.

In the vignettes, the characters act out their most pressing concerns that often weigh heavily on them as they go about their daily activities. In this chapter, I share personal reflections, interpretations, and conclusions that I arrived at as I journeyed through my inquiry. The following are dominant themes that I have identified. (1). Teachers and students live in an environment full of fear and distrust. (2). If we listen to the counternarratives of teachers and students, we will gain a deeper understanding of the injustices occurring in our schools. (3). Southern cultural attitudes towards women perpetuate injustices in our schools, and we must challenge the power structure that creates and perpetuates these injustices. It is our responsibility to choose to hear the voices of the oppressed and act upon what we hear. (4). Teachers' and students' counterstories may serve to challenge the dominant metanarrative that most people recognize and identify as representative of the teacher/student elementary population. (5). We must choose to hear and act upon these counterstories in order to provide positive and unlimited opportunities for our children, and for our futures.

The implications of these emerging themes are: **(1)** Since the current climate of the ever-increasing pressure to raise achievement and the demands of standardization in schools depreciates teachers and students and incites their fears, public schools desperately need spaces in which the root causes of these fears are exposed, the negative effects on students and teachers is examined, and a more trusting and encouraging alternative is created. **(2)** It is of paramount importance

to create space for educators, administrators, policy makers, and the public to listen to the counternarratives from teachers and students, challenge stereotypical images imposed upon them, hear their voices and concerns, feel their struggles and frustrations, and recognize the root causes of narrow, unfair and frustrating policies and practices on the education of our children in schools and societies.

(3) The hegemony influenced by Southern cultures and values perpetuates a patriarchal structure that affects how the female populations in elementary schools act, how others perceive them, and how they are treated professionally and personally. Those female students and teachers, particularly those who are praised for being good, submissive, and quiet, and who do not dare to question the power structure, are in turn unknowingly pushed to participate in the oppressive injustices that continue in schools today. **(4)** Counterstories of elementary teachers and students challenge the dominant narratives of power and hegemony, particularly the stereotypical views of teachers and students experiencing frustrations and injustices perpetuated by current oppressive policies and practices in our schools and societies. **(5)** Teachers and students, along with parents, the community, administrators, other educators, policy makers, and all others involved in the education of our society, must make a conscientious choice to hear the voices of the oppressed, question the purposes and aims of education for our children in today's schools, and work together to expose and negate the forces that are currently destroying opportunities for unlimited possibility and freedom for creative potential that all children deserve to experience.

Many everyday occurrences and incidents that take place in schools are the result of teachers and students being pressured to perform out of fear. Students have much to fear in school. They face the fear of failure, the fear of scoring low on standardized tests, fear of punishment, humiliation, or fear of their weaknesses being exposed. They often fear the administration and their teachers. Fear surrounds the decision of whether they will pass to the next grade or not. They are afraid of the unknown they face in school, and are apprehensive about whether or not their teachers and their peers will accept them. Many fear the act of taking standardized tests, and begin talking about their fear of it on the first days of school.

Teachers also experience, and are often motivated out of fear. They also experience many of the very same fears that students experience. The fear of professional failure, fear of students' low test scores, punishment, humiliation, and exposure of weaknesses by administration or other teachers. Teachers fear the power administrators have over them, and how that power might be used to manipulate, exploit, or diminish their status as a professional. They fear that their already low salaries will dwindle due to forced furloughs, or that their jobs will be threatened because of students' low test scores, negative evaluations, or other cultural factors beyond their control. They fear that they will not be properly prepared to deliver the frequently changing curriculum as demanded by their superiors. They fear that they cannot meet the constantly changing demands of the curriculum, and the lengthy time and preparation it takes to implement those changes.

Many of these fears can be linked to the current political policies of standardization and commodification that are rampant in the school culture. Apple (2001) argues that “A national curriculum and especially a national testing program are the first and most essential steps towards increased marketization” (p. 84). Teachers and students are mechanized by the curriculum, which is based on what the testing companies create and sell to the state departments of education. The tests become the all important measuring stick for the politicians who make empty promises of improving education, and continually implement more reforms to be measured by high-stakes testing. Despite the fears perpetuated by these fallacious processes, most teachers seek out ways to “cover and cope” with the demands and fears, or find a support system of other like-minded teachers or sympathizers. Most elementary teachers are rule-followers by nature, and cope with fears by becoming followers who avoid conflict by choosing not to question authority. Since the current climate of the ever-increasing pressure to raise achievement and the demands of standardization in schools depreciates teachers and students and incites their fears, public schools desperately need spaces in which the root causes of these fears are exposed, the negative effects on students and teachers is examined, and a more trusting and encouraging alternative is created (**Meaning 1**).

The fears haunting teachers and students often force them into conformity to the legalistic, rigid standards set by policy makers. Teachers and students alike are rewarded for “following the leader,” even if it means falling into a pit. “One either conforms to the herd mentality cultivated and reproduced at school, and in

the society, or one...*has* to allow oneself to be targeted as a scapegoat for the voyeuristic enjoyment and vented frustration of the rest” (Webber, 2003, p. 118). Many teachers are frustrated and struggle with overwhelming and unrealistic demands. Forced to conform to narrow practices and policies, their voices are often disregarded and silenced, and their experience and education disrespected when they attempt to act with autonomy in curricular and professional settings. Fine (1992) describes this as “Standard educational practice – the silencing of student and community voices. Silencing signifies a terror of words, a fear of talk” (p. 115). Educators are forced to abandon their intellect, disregard critical thought processes, and rely only on objective, scientifically based “facts” when solving issues, confronting problems, or making important educational decisions. Teachers are strictly required to follow only processes that are (supposedly) data-driven for every need, instead of dealing with curricular decisions, management issues, or decisions concerning individual students by using professional, experiential, and personal judgment. We are not allowed to creatively and critically solve issues and plan strategies, but instead, are forced into a mold and stamped out as if we are robots being formed on an assembly line. The current attitude is that the curriculum must be teacher-proof. In today’s schools, a teacher’s expertise and judgment is unacceptable, irrelevant, and inadmissible. Popular thought is that the teacher is incapable of making a correct judgment based on professional, practical knowledge. The lack of respect and disregard for teachers’ professional autonomy is evident in the way decisions are made, issues are resolved, and orders are handed down. Important decisions must be made

based on scientific evidence alone, and are void of professional input. Teachers are not encouraged to think theoretically, or philosophically, and neither are students.

Part of the oppressive injustices that teachers endure in this hegemonic setting are overwhelming, unrealistic demands. Many empty and time-consuming requirements take quality time away from the actual act of teaching, facilitating learning, or responding to student needs. Teachers spend long hours at work and long weekends at home attempting to complete assigned tasks and trying to fulfill demands. More often than not, because of cultural mores, they never question the purpose behind the demands, why the demands are there, or where they have originated. They have been conditioned to be silent, and to perform as instructed. Lesson plans must be written, coded to the Common Core standards, and vertically aligned. Kid-friendly “I can” statements must be created for each lesson (an updated version of behavioral objectives). Students must not take time out to look out the window when snow begins to fall, or stop working on assignments when a local or national newsworthy event happens. The curriculum must be covered because the test will account for adequate teaching and learning, and there is no time to divert. Is it truly worth covering all the subject matter? Does the “teachable moment” still exist? Are our current curricular practices helping students learn how to democratically live and thrive together in a humane and democratic fashion? Overwhelming, empty, and often meaningless tasks and duties alienate us from one another and from the students, and the students are the ones who suffer the most.

It is of paramount importance to create space for educators, administrators, policy makers, and the public to listen to the counternarratives from teachers and students, challenge stereotypical images imposed upon them, hear their voices and concerns, feel their struggles and frustrations, and recognize the root causes of narrow, unfair and frustrating policies and practices on the education of our children in schools and societies (**Meaning 2**). Our practices should be open to a different perspective; a perspective that challenges current reality and places more confidence in the teacher who has direct experience with the students and the curriculum, and also places confidence in the student themselves as curious and knowledgeable learners. Our schools should be places in which all learners have equal opportunities to flourish in an environment that is both critical and creative.

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known (Illich, 1970, p. 75).

Students cannot be expected to respect their teachers when teachers are not shown respect for their personal experience, talents, insights, and professionalism. Current educational policies and practices do not create an environment that is democratic in the truest sense. Students are not respected for their personal talents, differences, interests, or abilities. Rather, the government,

corporate, and militaristic policies that drive our educational system in hopes of strengthening the US on the global front, and compete with other countries for power, encourages conformity and standardization.

Since the great majority of the elementary teachers in this study are female and have been raised in the South, the effects of the cultural milieu plays a major role in understanding the underlying power structure and its effects on teachers' actions. Many teachers, me included, are generally unaware of how their cultural region and heritage affect their actions, and how it affects the public's perception of them and how they are treated, because they have never viewed their personal role in society outside of their personal cultural lens. We are products of our Southern culture. We know what it is like to be female, to be female in an elementary school, and to be female in the South. We are often ignorant of other cultures, because diversity is not a part of our present or our past. We feel the strain of racism as we have class discussions about the civil war, civil rights, and the history of slavery in the South. We experience the sharp pain of injustices as they are inflicted upon us, and upon our students at the hands of the patriarchal authorities that exert their power over us. We are sometimes unknowingly inflictors of that pain ourselves without realizing it. Yet, we still have hope for a better future, in the midst of our despair.

Southern female teachers inherit and accept this monocultural thinking because it is how they have been raised, how their family and community think, and how they have functioned through their own educational journeys. Therefore, they pass that cultural legacy of learning on to the students in their own

classrooms. They have been taught to be submissive, and have been encouraged and rewarded when they accept and submit to authority, especially male authority. They rarely question cultural and historical ideologies and find that it is not proper or acceptable to question the power relationships that exist. These factors interconnect to produce both a docile teacher and student, especially female teachers and students, who silently function in oppressed environments unknowingly. Students are not required or encouraged to engage in critical thinking, and they are not encouraged to interact humanely or to have sustained human connections with each other. They are taught to regurgitate, conform, and compete. The hegemony influenced by Southern cultures and values perpetuates a patriarchal structure that affects how the female populations in elementary schools act, how others perceive them, and how they are treated professionally and personally. Those female students and teachers, particularly those who are praised for being good, submissive, and quiet, and who do not dare to question the power structure, are in turn unknowingly pushed to participate in the oppressive injustices that continue in schools today (**Meaning 3**). The stereotypical image of the obedient female who knows her “place” in the power structures must be challenged. Society, Southern society in particular, needs to hear the voices of the potentially powerful force of elementary educators who are knowledgeable, capable, and who possess invaluable insights into the true nature of young learners. The talent, skill, and discernment of a whole segment of our population lays dormant because of the cultural hegemony that exists in our Southern culture.

I will always remember the first time someone, when realizing that I was an elementary teacher, made a statement to me reflecting his stereotypical view of what a schoolteacher does every day. “Oh, all you do is play all day!” And, “Yeah, you probably don’t do much but watch movies all day, do you?” I also have vivid memories of several conversations with influential people in my life about going back to school to obtain advanced degrees. The underlying connotation was always one of, what did I need an advanced degree for? I was only teaching second grade (or fourth, or whatever grade I was in at the time). And, oh yes, I will also remember the classic “look” I have received when asked where I attended college, or what my degrees were in. “Oh, elementary education. Nice.” Is the typical condescending response. “Teachers are often pegged as the problem. And classroom knowledge is trivialized. Teaching or running a school is characterized as just not being that hard. And the field of education in general is bemoaned as bereft of talent” (Rose, 2009, p. 57). The general lack of respect for educators rears its ugly head often. These dominant narratives reflecting power and hegemony can be challenged through the stories of elementary teachers and their experiences. Counterstories of elementary teachers and students challenge the dominant narratives, or metanarrative of power and hegemony, particularly the stereotypical views of teachers and students experiencing frustrations and injustices perpetuated by current oppressive policies and practices in our schools and societies (**Meaning 4**). I challenge all readers to lay aside their typically accepted images of schools, teachers, and students, and view the lived reality of life inside elementary schools from a new and different perspective. Is life inside

an elementary school easy? No! Challenging? No doubt! Heartbreaking?
Sometimes. Thankless? Typically. Respected? Rarely. Worth it? Well, it depends.
Not for the faint of heart? For sure! If one is to have a realistic view of the impact
that the present social, economic, cultural, and political issues have on current
elementary education practices and policies, it is paramount that the voices from
within be respected, heard, and understood. No reform, no action of
accountability, no threat, and no new and improved curricular effort will bring
about a fair, positive, and effective environment conducive to the fulfillment of
human potential without the inclusion of those practicing within the walls of our
schools.

At the core of our work is the belief, despite the distressing signs around
us, that the world is indeed changeable; that it can be transformed into a
better, more just, more peaceful place; and that the kids who show up in
our classrooms each day not only deserve such a world, but can be
instrumental in helping to bring it about. (Michie, 1999/2009, p. 193)

We believe in change. We hope for the best. We trust in the future of our
children. Teachers and students, along with parents, the community,
administrators, other educators, policy makers, and all others involved in the
education of our society, must make a conscientious choice to hear the voices of
the oppressed, question the purposes and aims of education for our children in
today's schools, and work together to expose and negate the forces that are
currently destroying opportunities for unlimited possibility and freedom for
creative potential that all children deserve to experience (**Meaning 5**). The social

and political milieu that exists within the context of our schools is at work to distort the freedom and liberty that learning can bring, and instead, constricts and chokes out the freedom of learning, and recreates it as a prison. Rather than reflect on the damage that is being done, we generally accept and obey whatever is handed down to us. The school community, policy makers, the public, and even the administration, personnel, and students inside schools often have limited concepts of what drives the curriculum and the events of their days, and why. We must open our eyes and help others to open theirs to see, recognize, and understand the political and cultural forces that are driving our local, state, and national curriculum into paralyzing and unjust practices. The frustration we as teachers feel must not simply dissolve and go down with the evening's bathwater, or be camouflaged by Prozac, or Zantac. Instead, it should move us into a new place of action, and others need to be encouraged to do the same. It is no longer enough just to have the desire to make a difference. It takes courage, and guts. We must let go of our fear. It takes an enlightened and open attitude. It takes a strong will that is willing to stand and meet the challenge. It takes bravery to go against the grain, and to swim against the tide. The insider must be willing to become an outsider. For if you rise against the inhumane practices in the institution of education, you must be willing to be exiled from what is familiar. Ming Fang He speaks of exile pedagogy workers as individuals who

Join one another and others to move beyond boundaries, to transgress orthodoxies, and to build a participatory intellectual movement to promote a more balanced, fair, and equitable human condition through acts of

teaching in an increasingly diversified and contested world landscape.
(2010, p. 471)

Instead of remaining quiet and submissive, it is time to start asking questions. Instead of lying down and accepting our fate as absolute, it is time to stand up and question what could be, and what should be. Instead of watching our students pass through schooling ill prepared for the future, it is time to ask, prepared for what? As I learned at a young age, and I teach my students, there are never too many questions, and the only stupid question is the one that is never asked. Instead of blindly conforming to the practices and policies that dictate our every waking moment as educators, we should critically question each practice and each policy. In his infinite wisdom, William Schubert (2009) encourages us to live in a state of questioning. We must continually question and reflect on what is worth knowing? What is worth doing? What is worth sharing? What is worth overcoming? Even, what is worth discarding?

If you were to be an invisible visitor in an elementary classroom for a day, you would hear things and witness events that would confuse and baffle you. Chances are it would not be what you expect. Although most of the time classrooms run as a well-oiled machine, an observer does not see the years of engineering and the weeks of practice that have brought it to such proficiency. You cannot possibly witness what it is really like in one day. Chances are, you would miss seeing the pain in a child's face when he/she is unable to accomplish a goal, or the pomp when a class rallies around another student. You could never see the sleepless nights the teacher spends worrying about a particular child's

well-being, or the indifference another teacher may feel towards that same student. Too many minutes, too many occurrences happen that pass by without ever being witnessed by anyone, even the invisible observer.

If you were to go out to dinner with a group of teachers as an invisible observer, chances are you will hear much conversation that will make no sense to you as an outsider. Their passionate discussions about OAS, RTI, and the components of the new writing program will leave you with questions, and probably a bit bored. There are certain conversations that occur between teachers that only make sense if you are a teacher. You may not realize it, but teachers in an elementary school rarely get to talk to one another on the job. Their day is filled with back-to-back lessons, meetings, making sure they can grab someone to watch their classroom while they run to the restroom, and trying to keep their head above the paperwork. The teacher's day is filled with many meaningless, repetitive tasks. If they meet outside of work, their unspoken purpose may be to relax, talk, and enjoy each other's company, but their conversation will undoubtedly always end up being about their kids. Good, bad, or indifferent, teachers care about their kids.

Finally, it is crucial that individuals and grassroots communities see education as a search for who and how they are becoming- to see themselves as developers of curricula, currere, and public pedagogies as they more fully find who they are and hope to be. We cannot expect or allow the grand acquirers—state or corporate—to do the job. (Schubert, 2010, p. 16)

If positive change were going to occur through the right reform, through a new curriculum, through new standards, or through changing practices, then the vast policy changes and practices enacted over the last several decades would have surely delivered the miracle cure for the ailing public school. Instead, we have schools that are less and less interested in the personal achievement and success of their students, and more and more of the public interested in the resulting spring test scores, and the fiscal benefit of higher test scores to the community and local schools. We are producing students that are disengaged and uninterested in the “game” of schooling, and desperate for meaningful experiences.

If you see the kids are dead, common sense will tell you you better change your strategy, you know/ If all the kids are looking at you like a bunch of zombies, common sense will tell you you’re doing something wrong.
(Michie, 1999/2009, p. 154)

Are we staring back into the faces of dead kids? If we are, then why? I see teachers who stare at dead kids all day. Sometimes I wonder if they are even remotely aware that the kids are like zombies? Do they care? Or have they become so mechanistic that it no longer fazes them. Have we become so indoctrinated to our sacred curriculum and its mode of deliverance that we have forgotten the reason we teach? Jackson (1968/1990, p. 111) states that “Inattention may have its roots not only in the content of the lesson *per se* nor in psychological deficiencies within the student but rather in the nature of the institutional experience called ‘going to school.’” We cannot always blame the

student for his/her inattention. More often than not, the content that is being delivered has no relevant meaning to our students and their lives. We often witness “The dulled minds of those whose education has consisted in the acquirement of inert knowledge [as they] emerge from school and from the university” (Whitehead, 1929/1967, p. 32). Learning disconnected material for a test breeds inattentiveness, dullness, and frustration. Whitehead (1929/1967) admonishes us to present learning that is based in “The evocation of curiosity, of judgment, of the power of mastering a complicated tangle of circumstances, the use of theory in giving foresight in special cases” (p. 5), and to realize that “There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations” (p. 6).

If we desire to enable others to live a more meaningful and participatory life, we need to be aware of the social forces that have and continue to shape our public school curriculum. Are the current curriculum reforms bringing a more meaningful and participatory life to our youth? What about the youth that are disadvantaged because of their economic condition? Are we giving them equal opportunities to reach their potential? Should we be in search of something different? Perhaps we need a new vision. A vision of liberation. A vision that may liberate us from practices that do not lead all sectors of our society to more independent, challenging, fulfilling, and democratic practices. Dewey (1897/1964, p. 437) states, “All reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward

arrangements, are transitory and futile.” We do not need a new reform initiative. We have been through plenty of those. We need a shift in ideology.

As teachers, we can inspire our students to become more conscious of the human condition. We can orient our teaching and practice toward a larger social vision and sustainable change, not simply, or only, organizational goals. Our teaching can become both a form of protest and love. We situate our teaching in our duty and responsibility to encourage a collective effort to transform our environment, institutions, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where we learn to become agents of democracy and social justice. (Gause, Okun, Stalnaker, Nix-Stevenson, Chapman, 2009, p. 50)

As teachers and students inside public schools, we rarely think outside the walls of our environment. If you were a fish swimming inside a fishbowl for years, even decades, you would become comfortable with your surroundings. The water temperature is nice. You know what time of day you will be fed, what the food tastes like, and how much will be given to you to eat. You are comfortably familiar with your fellow residents, and understand their sounds and movements. You sense when your water begins to get dirty, and know the great upheaval of the “changing of the water” will happen soon, but you are reassured by the fact that you have been through it before, and it will be all right. Once you have been exiled, and have witnessed the world outside of the fishbowl, however, your interpretation of your environment shifts. Your vision is enlarged. You no longer have the narrow viewpoint you had when you only knew the inside of the

fishbowl. You see a different world. You have a completely different perspective of reality than you did before.

I have become that fish out of water. When you have been inside the bowl all your life as I have, and your reality shifts because you catch a glimpse of life from outside the bowl looking in, your life-view changes. For most of my life, I have only been intimate with the inside of the fishbowl. The inside of the bowl is all I have ever experienced. Now, I have had the opportunity to take a glimpse from the outside. I have been exposed to multiple interpretations of what my landscape looks like from the outside viewpoint. I now have a strong desire for others to capture a glimpse of a new, different, and sometimes strange vantage point from the outside looking in. It is awesome. But it is also very scary.

Sometimes, you just want to jump back in and keep swimming in your cloudy, comfortable water. The only problem is, you cannot deny that you now see that your reality inside the bowl is only part of the picture. You want the other fish to be able to see what you have seen. Their reality is only part of the picture, and you want to enlarge their view of the world, just as yours has been enlarged.

Sharing my “out of bowl” experience is one way I have chosen to expose others to different ideologies and theoretical perspectives they may not have considered before. I agree with Schubert, when he says:

I am still convinced that the most important outcome of educational experience is to ask in new ways what it means to grow into a better human being, to make that a lifetime assignment or project, and to act on increasingly better answers to questions about the kinds of contributions

that can be made to others, life generally, and the planet that is our context. (Schubert, 1992, p. 142)

It is my hope that what I have shared and experienced over the course of a lifetime in elementary education, coupled with new, provocative, and revolutionary ideas gleaned from being a doctoral student, will inspire, energize or at least agitate those who make it their mission to publicly or privately scrutinize the state of public education. This is my purpose.

This inquiry illustrates the common threads of injustices, struggles, roadblocks, hindrances, and challenges that block teachers and students from reaching their full potential. It is of paramount importance to create space for educators, administrators, policy makers, and the public to listen to the counternarratives, challenge stereotypical images of teachers and students, hear their voices and concerns, feel their struggles and frustrations, and recognize the root causes of narrow, unfair and frustrating policies and practices on the education of our children in schools and societies. Teachers, educators, parents, students, administrators, policy makers, and all the other members of schools and societies should work together to fight back the evil force of standardization and commodification of schooling and create inspiring learning environments where our children have equitable and unlimited opportunities to reach their greatest human potential.

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