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This dissertation is an exploration of alternative schools that are offered to students who might otherwise be kicked out or drop out of public schools. I examine the more traditional options offered by public school systems, as well as more unusual schools that offer a democratic education. My primary research question is: How can a high school create an engaging education around the values of peace and justice? After a discussion of my methods and how they have changed over the course of this project, I look at the history of democratic and progressive schooling, and compare and contrast that history with contemporary practices in public school. Then I look at the philosophy underlying school practices and policy. I examine how neoliberalist policies impact schools today, and then envision the philosophy of an alternative school that better serve students who do not experience success in more traditional public schools. From there I explore current practices, both in traditional schools and in schools that aim to provide a democratic education for students. I look at the benefits of providing an authentic, democratic, multicultural education that incorporates social justice and what I term spirit-learning, which aims to offer tools to students so that they learn how to create peace in their own, personal lives as they learn to work towards creating peace in their communities and in the world they will inherit.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE ALTERNATIVES: CONSIDERING A  
PROGRESSIVE POSSIBILITY FOR  
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

by

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

**Background**

After teaching in the public school system for over ten years, my ideas about education and the role of educators have transformed dramatically. I had come to public school after teaching Freshman Composition in local colleges, and I had little experience in considering a variety of teaching methods, “classroom management,” or “data-driven” instruction. As a Freshman Composition instructor, my ability as a teacher was never challenged, and I felt competent and even successful, despite my inexperience and lack of instruction in various methods or learning styles. When I started teaching in the public school system, I suffered from major culture shock. College students seemed either more open-minded, or simply more willing to go along with the education we provided. They had been more or less successful thus far, and intended to graduate from college and move on to professional work. In contrast, my high school students mistrusted me, doubted the value of what I “taught,” and the climate felt antagonistic, even though I went in with an open-minded attitude.

When I began teaching high school students, I was assigned to teach “CP English 11,” which meant American Literature. “CP” meant “College Prep,” so I assumed that my students intended to go to college, and I treated them that way, giving tough reading

assignments and assuming they read challenging articles with a dictionary on hand to look up unfamiliar words. My students complained that I worked them too hard. “We’re CP,” they’d tell me. Not yet recognizing that in educational jargon words tend to mean the opposite of what the actual words mean, I asked, “Doesn’t that mean you plan to go to college?” I asked. “No,” they explained. “It means we’re the dumb ones.” I was stunned into silence. I felt sad that they identified themselves as dumb, and also confused that the label “College Prep” told the students that they were dumb. Why prepare to go to college if you’ve been classified as “dumb?” I had a lot to learn.

My first few years in the high school classroom were filled with despair. For the majority of my students, school was boring and a constant power struggle. Despite all the courses that I had since taken in order to receive my certification, despite all I had learned about lesson planning, learning styles, and teaching reading and writing, I couldn’t bring my students along with me. I felt like dropping out, myself. At the same time, I was growing more convinced that my struggles had less to do with my individual traits and abilities as a teacher, and less to do with my specific students, but more to do with the public school culture. I could see that what we were expected to teach, despite our school mantra: “Rigor, relationships, and relevance” was irrelevant to students, and they had no power to do anything about it but submit or resist.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem I intend to explore is ultimately a question of how to make education an experience that young people enjoy and find valuable while simultaneously preparing them to create a peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Our current educational system

prepares young people for a world of competition with only one right answer. I suspect that many students know that what they learn in school does not reflect reality or prepare them for a successful future. One of the participants in my research, LeLe (all names are pseudonyms) said that school is not preparing her for the future. She explained:

'Cause it's like after elementary school and middle school, you stop basically learning things you'll ever need, and they basically tell you that in math, like, 'You're not really gonna need this.' Who needs to know how to do a quadratic formula to graph something? Unless you're going to be a scientist. You can't use that to cook nothing, or buy somethin'. So I don't think it helps you. I think it just takes up time.

LeLe later states that she wants to learn practical things, like how to balance a checkbook, for example. She does not feel that school is preparing her for the future because she does not see how she will apply what she is learning to her everyday life in the future. Her point is valid, and one I have considered quite a bit when I sit in classes. While learning is always good brain exercise, if the learning does not feel relevant, then the exercise is worthless to some students. When so much time is focused on content that seems irrelevant, than school as a whole seems like something that “just takes up time.”

In an attempt to “prove accountability,” teachers are given a set curriculum to follow, and are rated according to how well their students perform on a standardized exam created by an outside organization. Ironically, in my teacher certification program, we learned that “best practices” mandate that a teacher start with the end in mind. An effective teacher is supposed to work backwards, considering what she wants her students to know by the end of a unit, semester, or year, creating the assessment, and then creating plans to prepare her students for success. However, in reality, in an attempt to ensure

“fairness,” teachers are not allowed to see the standardized benchmarks or End-of-Grade exams until she passes them out to her students. So, despite the fact that “best practices” say we should “begin with the end,” (Lemov, 2010, p. 27) teachers are prohibited from actually practicing in that way. Teachers are told more or less what will be on the test, what students are expected to know, and when and how to teach that material. In other words, teachers are accountable to someone else’s standards and someone else’s curriculum on someone else’s schedule, which teachers actually had little input in creating. As H. Svi Shapiro explains, “The typical American classroom, trapped more than ever by the dead hand of ‘standards’ and ‘accountability,’ is a world that is emotionally, intellectually, and morally disconnected from the real and pressing demands of the human condition” (p. 177). Regardless of students’ interests, abilities, and strengths, all are assessed in the same way, and their ability to succeed on multiple choice exams will impact the teacher’s reputation and salary, as well as the students’ “success.”

In such a system, teachers and students alike are alienated from education. Teachers feel powerless to determine a curriculum that will inspire their students, and many children, especially those who may struggle with traditional teaching methods and don’t intend to further their education in college do not see the relevance in the material presented to them. Not only do children and teachers feel alienated from the educational system, but what is being taught in school does not prepare children for a complex and changing future. Multiple choice tests do not prepare students to think deeply about issues, consider multiple perspectives, and reflect on who benefits and who may be harmed from various decisions and systems that are in place. Rather, such a superficial

appearance of accountability and rigor teaches children to see others as competition and to see multiple perspectives as either right or wrong. We are teaching children to accept the status quo which prepares them for the present, but not for the future that they will face. While we cannot teach children everything that they will need to be successful in the future, I believe that it is the responsibility of the adults to prepare the children to have thoughtful mental habits that will serve to question and challenge present systems in order to improve them. In her critique of education, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) explains how high quality teachers focus on skills that are not effectively measured by multiple choice tests.

Decades of research have shown that teachers who produce high levels of learning for initially lower- and higher-achieving students alike provide active learning opportunities involving student collaboration and many uses of oral and written language, connect to students' prior knowledge and experiences, provide hands-on learning opportunities, and engage students' higher-order thought processes, including their capacities to approach tasks strategically, hypothesize, predict, evaluate, integrate, and synthesize ideas. (p. 55)

Furthermore, the measure of success that has been mandated by politicians and those who make decisions about education reflect a positivist perspective on education, which does not allow room for the creativity and critical thinking that students will need to face the future effectively. Diane Ravitch (2010) explains:

Our schools will not improve if we value only what tests measure. The tests we have now provide useful information about students' progress in reading and mathematics, but they cannot measure what matters most in education. Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of

innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavor. (p. 226)

Test scores imply that children in poverty are less competent and intelligent than their wealthier classmates; in reality, they reveal the disconnect between the cultures of those who create the test and those who take the test. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) explains further:

The presumption that undergirds much of the conversation about the achievement gap is that equal educational opportunities now exists; therefore, continued low levels of achievement on the part of students of color must be intrinsic to them, their families, or their communities. Yet, when the evidence is examined, it is clear that educational outcomes for these students are at least as much a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, both inside and outside of school, as they are a function of race, class, or culture. Furthermore, students' willingness to commit to school and their own futures is interwoven with their perceptions about whether the society, their schools, and their teachers believe they are worthwhile investments-perceptions that enable them to invest in themselves. (p. 30)

Since I switched from teaching American Literature to teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), my classroom experiences have helped me to recognize how powerfully culture impacts a student's ability to be successful at standardized exams. As Darling-Hammond (2010) explains, test scores do not accurately reflect a child's intelligence, understanding, or effort to succeed. Many factors come into play, and when politicians, administrators, and teachers put so much weight on the results of standardized tests, they simplify an extremely complicated and unjust educational system. For example, every year ESOL teachers of in North Carolina, as well as 33 other states, give students a standardized language test with four components: listening, reading, writing,

and speaking. A few years ago, one of the questions on the speaking test asked students to identify appropriate toppings on pizza. Correct answers could be pepperoni, mushrooms, peppers, etc. Whoever made the test (the testing company is based in Wisconsin), obviously did not consider the possibility that the student answering may not have had pizza in his home country, or what they put on pizza in other countries might vary from what we might consider a typical topping here in the U.S. This question does not accurately reflect a student's ability in English, but rather reflects acculturation to the U.S. Furthermore, every year for the past four years, I have contacted the company that makes the test because the majority of questions in the speaking component have male figures as the main subject, and if there is a female figure, she is working with a male, or she is in the background. My point is that the people who make standardized tests reveal much about themselves and their values, often to the detriment of the test-takers. The more closely the background and experiences of the students match that of the people who make the tests, the more closely the test-taker will be aligned with the "right answer" as identified by the test-maker.

Another revealing experience that I have had around tests shows how absurd it is to put so much weight on multiple choice assessments. A few years ago I team-taught an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English class with a Nationally Board Certified English teacher. We were both White, middle class, and in our 30s. Near the end of the year, we spent much time preparing students for the multiple-choice EOG by doing practice questions together. We would read passages silently, answer as we thought best, and then discuss our answers. She lost the answer guide, and I was quite disturbed to find that she and I disagreed on

many answers! Despite her National Board Certification, and my MA in English Literature, we couldn't agree on the main idea of short passages geared towards middle school students. We also had different ideas regarding what could be inferred from the passages. If two "highly qualified" educators can't discern the right answer, imagine how stressful and impossible success would be for thirteen year olds with less experience, less reading ability, and less opportunity to read for pleasure. Imagine how such a test would be experienced by students whose families speak a language, or languages, other than English at home.

In order to create a future that is more just and more viable in terms of the environment and our economic system, we need to re-envision education. Working from the past will only inspire more of the same, and the status quo is increasingly oppressive towards growing groups of people. As important as reading and math skills are, equally important are our abilities to problem-solve, think critically, question, create, explore, get along peacefully, and resolve differences without resorting to violence.

My ultimate goal is to provide an educational experience where students who would otherwise drop out or get kicked out of school could re-learn to love learning. I hope to inspire young people to learn more about the political, economic, and social conditions that encompass their lives, and from there, I hope to work with them to build a more just community. I want school to be a place of active learning and deep thinking, and a place of joy and wonder. Finally, I want to help young people envision their future, individually, as members of a community, and as citizens in a democracy, and then I hope to inspire them to build their dreams into reality. Although this vision sounds

absurdly idealistic and probably impossible, I know that schools and programs with similar visions exist, and the purpose of my dissertation is to help me learn about other alternative opportunities available, learn from alienated students what kind of education would inspire them to re-engage in learning with adults, and create a vision of an educational experience that I would like to establish. Adults have much to teach our youth, but we need to pay attention to what children want to learn when they are showing us so clearly that they do not care about the education that we currently offer.

### **Values**

I'm going into this research with certain values that reflect who I am as well as my positionality. These values will be the cornerstone for the education center that I hope to open. These values include community, social justice, self-care, curiosity, and lifelong learning. Every policy I hope to implement in my school and every course that is offered will reflect these values.

### **Community**

In my suburban, middle-class upbringing, I was not raised to have a strong sense of community, especially outside my family's synagogue. My own experience in school was an independent experience, with a strong focus on competition, and few, if any, opportunities for collaboration and community-building. When I started teaching, I thought the classroom represented a community of sorts, but it never felt cohesive or connected, and I still struggle to establish a community of learners in my classroom. I find it challenging to break through what Elizabeth Dodson Gray (1989) identifies as the "culture of separated desks." H. Svi Shapiro (2006) further elucidates:

The typical school classroom in America is a place where students are expected to pursue their tasks in isolation from their peers.... He or she [the isolated successful student] is the one who is able to succeed at the constant process of doing the required work, performing well or at least adequately in the endless round of tests and examinations, and accumulating the points and grades that have come to represent education. (p. 59)

Students have learned to see one another as competition, and even among friends there's still a lack of cohesion. Maria explained:

It's better to stay your distance from people because if you don't, then they'll try to put you in things that you really don't need to be in. They'll add you in stuff that... it's just their problem and stuff, and they're trying to add you in stuff. I just try to stay to myself. It's better that way anyways.

I think that Maria means that if she gets too involved with peers, then they will include her in situations that she does not need to be part of. She doesn't want to get dragged into other students' troubles or situations that may lead to trouble. She later describes her peers as "Very childish. Um, not mature at all.... Like they are, some are mean, some are, like they're trying to boil you 'til you're at your boiling point. That's how they are." From my perspective as a middle school teacher, it seems that students are just as easily cruel to one another as they are supportive of one another. When they feel that their value is determined by a grade or a test score, or even a teacher's praise, they fall into the trap of seeing each other as competitors, which easily devolves into enemies.

However, I feel strongly that future generations will be better able to work together and resolve differences if they have more experience valuing and participating in community building. Being in a community of learners can help children learn content, and it will help them learn how to navigate differences more effectively than adults do

presently. Furthermore, by bringing families into our classroom community of learners, we can multiply our power. For example, if parents can engage actively in their children's education, the family will be stronger, the students' enthusiasm will be stronger, and the school itself will benefit from the strengths, skills, and wisdom of those family members. In her book *A cord of three strands*, Soo Hong (2011) describes how one parent's involvement in her child's school helped her to recognize her responsibility as a member of the entire school community:

Lisa Contreras, a former parent mentor, emphasizes that over the years, she has felt a growing sense of responsibility toward all the children in the school, not just her own. While she previously looked at schools solely through the perspective of her children's experience, that is now impossible: "These are all our kids, and if you see anything going on, or you see anyone who needs help, or you see a child crying-you are going to stop and you are going to find out what's going on with that child. That's one important thing that I learned as a parent mentor-that all of these kids are my responsibility, not just my own. In this school, that means that there are other adults and parents who are looking out for my children, too. If we see something that concerns us or troubles us, we don't look the other way because it's not our business. In fact, it is my business, and I have to let other adults in the school know, because this is the community that surrounds my child every day. It's all connected." (pp. 82-3)

This is the kind of community that I hope to inspire in my school. When people recognize that we are all connected, that the well-being of others impacts our own well-being, our communities will be strong and supportive, and individuals will do their best to take care of one another.

### **Social Justice**

Building community leads to the next value that will serve as a foundation at my school, which is social justice. When we feel that we are members of a community, it is

easier to feel compassion for others, and I believe that compassion leads people to engage in social justice work. In her chapter in *Teaching for diversity and social justice*, Lee Anne Bell (1997) describes social justice education as follows:

...Social justice education is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities), and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole. (p. 3)

There are so many areas where students can work to make society more just:

environment, health care, living wages, food availability, and voting rights identify a few directions where social justice work can make a difference to improve people's lives. My hope is that students who learn to engage in social justice work will feel more engaged in both their education and their community because this work creates and serves communities, and such work empowers people to engage in efforts to make a positive difference. In addition, the more people engage in such efforts, the more they educate themselves and others so that they can be effective and creative in their work.

### **Self-care**

As well as valuing justice, a further value that will provide the foundation of my educational center is self-care. Adolescence is a time where young people are trying to figure out their identities, and doing so requires strength, curiosity, and openness. Rather than allow oneself to be defined by others, I would like my center to offer young people

an opportunity to experiment and explore in order to open up possibilities that maybe previously seemed impossible. In our current system, adults label students in a variety of ways, generally by defining problems children face in school, such as Exceptional Children who struggle with academics in traditional settings, Attention Deficit Disorder for those who cannot sit still for as long as teachers would like, and Behavioral and Emotional Disorders for children who resist the authority of their teachers and administrators. We also label students by their test scores: ones and twos failed standardized tests, threes and fours passed. We create tutorial groups based on the students' scores from the previous year's tests. In addition, students label each other through their social status or group membership: jocks, thugs, band geeks, etc. My hope is that students will learn to see beyond labels, and define themselves as human beings, open and curious about the world around them, and refusing short cuts that diminish their own, as well as others' humanity.

One primary vehicle for teaching self-care is through meditation, which allows practitioners to quiet their automatic, habitual ways of thinking, or at least recognize them, and then to create space to be more aware of the present moment. Meditation sounds simple: it is focusing one's attention on the breath. However, because humans develop mental habits, thoughts often wander. Focusing on breathing often seems boring after a few breaths, so maintaining attention in this way takes sustained effort. Once a meditator learns to recognize when her thoughts have strayed from the breath, she learns two primary lessons: first, she learns to re-focus her attention back to the breath, and second, she learns to gain some distance from her thoughts. She learns that her thoughts

do not define her, and that she can learn to control her thinking, rather than having her thinking control her. Recognizing her ability to control her thinking allows her to have options in terms of responding to challenges. She does not need to automatically respond in a habitual way, but rather can consider other possibilities. This practice helps people learn to respond to life's stresses and surprises in a calm, peaceful manner, rather than relying on our habitual patterns of anger and fear. Although meditation does not serve as a "quick fix" to any problems or struggles, I do believe that with regular practice, everyone can learn to be more at ease in life, more effective in facing struggles, and more peaceful in interactions with others, even in the midst of disagreements and conflicts.

Through meditation, students will learn a great deal about self-care that they will be able to carry with them throughout their lives. Meditation is a tool for facing challenges in a healthy and honest way, and will serve young people well as they face a lifetime of challenges ahead. Furthermore, not only does meditation teach children (and adults) how to handle challenges and complexity, but it also teaches us all how to be peaceful. Meditation can teach practitioners how to respond to conflict in a way that gets at the heart of the matter, rather than escalating it. Through meditation and non-violent communication, which I will discuss in more depth later, people can learn how to disagree in a way that affirms the other person's humanity, and strengthens the relationship despite disagreements. I believe that by learning explicitly how to take care of one's self, students can learn how to take care of each other and build communities that value peace and justice.

## **Life-long learning**

The final value that my education center will focus on is curiosity, which leads to life-long learning, and which ultimately is the goal of any educator who truly values the pursuit of knowledge. Unfortunately, many of the practices that we engage in in public schools serve to diminish our natural curiosity and desire to learn. True learning requires curiosity, and that cannot be forced into tidy, small containers. Alfie Kohn claims, “Interest, like achievement, is usually lower when students are working for a grade” (pp. 42-43). He further explains: “...Researchers have found that traditional grades are likely to lead to three separate results: less impressive learning, less interest in learning, and less desire to do challenging learning” (p. 43). When adults focus excessively on rating systems, whether through grades or standardized test scores, everyone suffers. Students learn that one right answer exists, there is only one right way to write, read, and think, and memorization becomes the most important aspect of schooling.

In contrast, I hope to create an education center or school where many possible answers can be discovered, and where failure is simply a step on the path to an answer. If we accept failure as part of the process of learning, students can experience failure with curiosity and acceptance without seeing it as a judgment about their intelligence or capabilities. This practice is much more likely to produce life-long learners than any system that relies so heavily on multiple choice tests and grades.

## **Redefining Success and the Purpose of Education**

Like many progressive educators who came before me, I feel strongly that standardization and accountability to bureaucrats are not the correct approach. Eve Tuck (2013) argues:

Educational accountability policies are not accountable to poor and low-income families, urban communities, migrant and immigrant communities, and disenfranchised peoples. Accountability policies are accountable to those who advocate for them, in order to keep a tight rein on how tax dollars are spent and/or to close out those who display any sort of dependence on the state. (pp. 341-2)

Accountability through standardized exams does not serve to prove that teachers are “good” or “bad,” nor does it prove that all students experience the same, equal, or equitable education. Rather, accountability reveals that students who come from backgrounds that most closely align with the adults who make the tests will be most successful, thus maintaining the status quo. Currently, our educational practices serve to simplify reality, but doing so does not prepare children to face the complexity of the real world with creativity and curiosity. Rather, they are being cowed into compliance. As far back as 1922, John Dewey recognized that the true purpose of education should not be to prepare children to accept present conditions, but rather to improve upon them to build a better future. “Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity” (p.111). If we are to “start with the end,” as educators following “best practices,” we ought to reconsider our ideas of success as well as our purpose of education.

How do we define success? In the current educational system, success means earning threes and fours on standardized exams, completing all exams successfully, and going on to college (or work, though college is generally seen as a better measure of success than work). “Success” in education means an ability to answer multiple choice questions “correctly,” and an ability to tolerate and participate in a process that provides little room, if any, for creativity, joy, and wonder. From my students’ perspective, success in school means learning how to get the best scores possible with the least amount of effort. As Shapiro (2006) explains:

We are told, repeatedly, as we grow up, that education’s real value is not in its capacity to draw us toward wisdom and understanding, or to make us thoughtful and socially responsible citizens, or to develop our potential as creative and imaginative beings. The overriding purpose of education is that it provides us with a commodity that we are able to exchange for a place in college, a better job, a promotion, a mortgage, a car loan, and so on. In other words, it is not the intrinsic experience of education that we value-what it offers to us as human beings and as members of a community. Education, instead, is something we “get” if we do what is required of us so that we can then cash it in for the pleasures and relative security of a middle-class life. (p. 41)

However, I would like to challenge both our current notions of success and the purpose of education. Success in school, from my perspective, would mean that students love learning, and they leave high school with a commitment to life-long learning as well as a commitment to helping their community, repairing and sustaining the environment, and/or working to spread justice in whatever arena inspires them. A successful education would inspire students to engage with the world around them in positive, creative, powerful, and empowering ways.

Further, the purpose of education would not be seen as it is now: a way to get into college, or a hoop to jump through in order to get a job. Rather, the purpose of education would be to help young people gain critical thinking skills, to help them see their community and culture with appreciation as well as with critique, to lead them to asking questions that challenge the status quo, to enrich their lives, and to create a future that is more peaceful, more sustainable, and more just than the present. George Counts (Dennis & Eaton, 1980) describes the purpose of education thus:

The great purpose of the public school therefore should be to prepare the coming generation to participate actively and courageously in building a democratic industrial society that will cooperate with other nations in the exchange of goods, in the cultivation of the arts, in the advancement of knowledge and thought, and in maintaining the peace of the world.... (pp. 52-53)

Although competition can inspire people to push harder, to work more, to learn faster, cooperation and collaboration can inspire such work habits as well, and can also lead to a more humane and compassionate way of being in the world and with others.

Collaboration teaches people to consider multiple perspectives, and through negotiating differences, working together with a united goal can help create more effective and more thoughtful responses to challenges.

Ultimately, my argument is one more among many for the need for a different type of education than what adults currently provide our children. The education center or school that I hope to open one day will be based on ideals of a progressive, democratic, and community-based education, and will provide an education that more closely reflects the values that our democracy was founded on, and an education that

values the human beings who are part of the school as more valuable, complex, and interesting than test scores, grades, obedience, or competition.

One area where I feel I am adding to the goals of past proponents of progressive and democratic educational theorists is in the area of peace. While many progressive educators may discuss peace issues with students, and despite the fact that most schools teach children about Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience, as a society, we are not good at being peaceful. Rather, we are good at starting wars, fighting wars, and creating technology that allows us to be more brutal and distant from the horrors of war. We're not good at ending war, and I think one way to start learning about peace is to practice peacefulness. We teach children conflicting messages in school. We teach young children to share and cooperate, but as they get older, sharing often is perceived as cheating, and competition becomes more common practice than cooperation and collaboration. We teach children to compete early on in their schooling, to be motivated by competition, and to see scarcity in order to enhance competition. In the U.S., we tell students that the purpose of school is economic, and not coincidentally, we are the military and economic superpower of the world, but that position is tenuous, and rather than perpetuating systems that create suffering, and ill-will, we could be a nation in the world community, working together to explore how to cope with climate change and end poverty and disease. Educators will be more effective at teaching peace if we start by focusing on a personal, spiritual level, and if we define success and the purpose of education towards that end. If the goal of education could be

redefined as creating a peaceful and just world, it seems more possible that we could create that future.

### **Moving Forward**

In this dissertation, my aim is to study alternatives to the public school system that employ a democratic, progressive philosophy. The second chapter will address methods I used in my research, particularly in regards to qualitative research with students enrolled at an alternative school, but also including theoretical research about a range of alternative schools. In chapter three, I provide a brief history of progressive and democratic education, mostly in the United States, but including practices in Brazil as well. Chapter four addresses the underlying philosophy guiding progressive and democratic education, and in this chapter, I include an area that I feel is often lacking in such discussions, which attends to the need to teach and practice peace in school. In chapter five I examine current practices at various alternative schools, mostly in the United States, and finally, in chapter six I discuss my own vision and how it fits in with the history and philosophy that I embrace. Also in chapter six, I describe some practices that I hope to employ at my alternative school, and I explain how those practices reflect the traditions and beliefs common to progressive, democratic schooling.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

#### **Research Questions**

With the increasing standardization of public school education, students are becoming less engaged and invested in their learning, and additionally, students are learning lessons from the hidden curriculum of public school that hinder their ability to live creatively, authentically, and ethically. When students drop out of school, their life chances for economic independence diminish substantially, but in order for students to succeed in school, they must be effective test-takers, view their peers as competitors, and believe that only one correct answer exists for any important question. These beliefs do not prepare children for a cooperative, creative, and dynamic future, and they hurt children's chances of creating a better world. With the threats of climate change, injustice, and perpetual war ongoing, we need to prepare children to view the world and life as a precious and also fragile miracle that demands our best efforts to sustain. My primary research question is: How can we create a high school that promotes an engaging education around the values of peace and justice? Further questions include: How would we teach peace and justice? How can we make education engaging and inspiring to students? How would decision-making occur? What would a school with such a focus look like in terms of classes and daily practices?

## **Paradigmatic Framework**

Like all good postmodernists, I suppose, I resist labels. I tend to find them limiting, and I like to consider myself a free-thinker and an independent actor in the world. However, I recognize that identifying the paradigm(s) that resonate with me will help me to frame my research and better understand why I make certain choices as well as how I understand and interpret experiences. With this in mind, I have come to recognize that although I see the value in many frameworks, primarily I subscribe to the postcritical paradigm, with constructivism also serving as a valuable influence on my thinking and my way of being in the world. Because it took me awhile to identify the “post” component of my critical framework, I will begin this section focusing on the critical paradigm, then I will explore the influences of constructivism, and then finally I will explain how the postcritical paradigm best fits my way of perceiving and being.

### **Critical Paradigm**

Notwithstanding my antipathy towards labels, I can recognize myself in much of what I read about critical researchers, and I feel grateful to know that I am not alone, and also to have a framework from which to proceed. While labels can be limiting, they can also provide a map from which to intelligently examine and clarify goals and routes to achieve them. The first thing I learned in my Ph.D. program was the need to unlearn much of what I thought I knew. In fact, I often joke that after I earn my Ph.D., if someone asks me what I’ve learned, I’ll have to answer by saying, “I’ve learned that I know nothing.” Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren (1994) explain how critical

researchers must recognize that knowledge is created and understood based on power.

They explain that researchers in the critical paradigm accept that:

...All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; ... facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;... certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;... oppression has many faces and ... focusing on only one at the expense of others... often elides the interconnections among them; and finally... mainstream research practices are generally... implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (pp. 139-40)

In other words, everything that I thought I knew, I now recognize has been “mediated by power relations,” and by seeing that, if I truly hope to help students who hate school, I must consider my own experience both as a Jewish, White former public school student who came from a middle-class background and as a current teacher who is precariously balanced on the edge of middle class. However, despite my awareness of the fragility of my class membership, I am also aware that the way I perceive the world and my role in it has been defined by my White middle- class values and lifestyle. The culture of school was never far from the culture in which I was raised, where dictionaries, encyclopedias, newspapers, museums, travel, and the library were all part of my upbringing. Our first family computer was in my bedroom. If I hope to do research that serves to be of benefit for students who struggle in and with school culture, I have to recognize my own privilege, and how my ideas about research and education could serve to perpetuate systems of oppression.

Furthermore, students who come from backgrounds with less privilege learn that they do not belong in school. Their history is rarely taught in depth, coursework rarely reflects or relates to their backgrounds, and teachers often do not recognize or understand the struggles these children face both at home and in society in general. Because of the disconnect between teachers, most of whom are White and middle class, their students, who may not come from a privileged background, and the curriculum, which is determined by bureaucrats and business people who are often White and middle to upper-class, many students may feel that they are invisible, their experiences don't count, and their history is unimportant. The power imbalance makes it difficult for teachers and students to listen to one another and fulfill one another's needs in a classroom, but the teachers may not even realize that they are not meeting their students' needs; they are simply following a curriculum provided to them.

### **Constructivist Paradigm**

While critical researchers consider how power and oppression operate throughout their work, constructivists also consider the interaction between the researcher and the researched as a way to create meaning through dialogue. Thomas Schwandt (1994) explains:

Constructivists are deeply committed to the... view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered. They emphasize the pluralistic and plastic character of reality – pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems; plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents. (p. 125)

He further describes a constructivist paradigm as "...a construction in the minds of individuals. There are multiple, often conflicting constructions, and all... are meaningful. Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time" (p. 128). While I believe that scientific and medical knowledge may in fact, be discovered, in terms of the social and political realms, I do not subscribe to the notion of one provable, certain truth. Rather, I feel that such truths are uncovered and created through dialogue or writing, and they develop and change over time. People create truths based on their experiences and the experiences others share. Consequently, people may have different truths. My only concern with Thomas Schwandt is his perception of truth as "the best-informed and most sophisticated construction" because I wonder who gets to determine which construction is the "best-informed." Who decides which is "most sophisticated?" Egon E. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln (1994) further clarify that the best constructions of knowledge build upon past constructions and require some form of consensus. They explain:

The variable and personal... nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents. These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange. The final aim is to distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions.... (p. 111)

In terms of my research, I feel that talking with students has impacted both their and my constructions of the "truth" of public education. They have enriched my understanding by sharing their experiences, which has informed me about their perceptions of reality,

and I expect my questions may have challenged them to consider possible alternatives to their current perspectives about school and education.

### **Postcritical Paradigm**

Initially, I thought that locating myself within the critical paradigm, informed by the constructivist paradigm, sufficiently described my way of understanding the world, but on further reflection and research, I found an even closer fit in the postcritical paradigm. Kathy Hytten (2004) describes a concern regarding critical ethnographers that resonated with my own wariness in terms of considering myself an “expert” after having studied “Others” experiences.

Most often, critical ethnographers are highly educated, and thus socially privileged, scholars studying in very marginalized communities. In the research setting, they attempt to develop a dialogue between the lived world of people and the broader social structures they see as constraining, yet too often macro analyses are privileged and researcher expertise takes precedence over local knowledge. (p.99)

She further explains that although critical ethnographers value self-reflection and critique of methods and presence in the field, they need to reflect, too, on the assumptions and frames of reference that they bring to their research. In other words, Hytten critiques the dominance of the analysis of the so-called expert, a privileged researcher in a setting of oppression. In contrast, she describes postcritical ethnography as more collaborative, with both researcher and researched learning together:

...Postcritical ethnographic research would be more fully dialogic, collaborative, and pedagogical. By pedagogical, I mean that both the researcher and the researched would be learning during the process, as well as developing the tools

for making positive social changes that are emergent from local communities, not thrust upon them. (p.101)

I feel strongly that this describes what I aimed to do. In my research, while participants taught me about their lives, I hope they also learned, both from sharing and considering their experiences, as well as my ideas, and also from the process of engaging with the research themselves.

In this dissertation, I have used two primary types of research: case study and theoretical. I have conducted interviews, shadowing, and focus groups with students who attended an alternative school for students who have been kicked out or long-term suspended from their local public school. Additionally, I have read books and articles about alternative schools, underserved students, and the philosophy of democratic and progressive schools. Furthermore, I have engaged in regular self-reflection and have kept a journal throughout the process, which I will also address on occasion.

### **Qualitative Research**

Initially, I employed collective case study for this research because it resonates with my theoretical framework as well as with my research questions. As I will address further later, the focus of my dissertation changed from qualitative case research to a more theoretical direction, but ultimately, I incorporate information from both types of research. I will begin by explaining the methods for my qualitative case research, and then I will discuss why my research shifted direction. Robert E. Stake (1994) explains that a collective case study is used to learn about a phenomenon. The focus is not on the

individual case, but rather, the hope is that through this type of study, a researcher may gain understanding about the phenomenon or population:

... Researchers may study a number of cases jointly in order to inquire into the phenomenon, population, or general condition. We might call this *collective case study*. It is not the study of a collective but instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest the common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each having voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (p. 237)

My research involves eight students who were enrolled at an alternative school during the Spring of 2013. Students are assigned to this school after an incident involving violence or drugs, and it is generally considered a last chance before expulsion. It provides students with the opportunity to continue earning required credits so that they may graduate with others in their grade. When I started this study, I assumed (wrongly) that the majority of students at this school were considered potential future drop outs or students who would ultimately get kicked out of school, and so I felt that I would be conducting a collective case study on students identified as “at-risk,” though I believe a more accurate term would be “underserved.” However, among the first of many unexpected deviations regarding my research was that most of the students who agreed to participate in my research did, in fact, intend to graduate from high school and complete college. Four of the eight participants had been enrolled in honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses in their home schools before they were assigned to the alternative school. Only one student expressed uncertainty about whether or not she would graduate from high school. LeLe said:

...When I get up in the morning, when I get here, it's just like, "It's almost over".... But then I get here, like, the way the teachers act or whatever, like, the way it makes us feel, it makes me not wanna finish high school, to be honest.

Of all the participants in my study, LeLe was the one who seemed most frustrated by the lack of freedom. She is strong-willed and seeks independence. Because Last Chance High is so focused on discipline and order, I think LeLe takes umbrage at what appears to be frequent nagging about superficial things that she knows do not impact her education, but rather force her to submit to the power of adults.

Robert K. Yin (2003) explains that a multiple case study may help to make findings slightly more generalizable. He explains, "analytic conclusions independently arising from two cases... will be more powerful than those coming from a single case... alone," and further states that "contexts of cases are likely to differ. If under these varied circumstances you still can arrive at common conclusions from both cases, they will have immeasurably expanded the external generalizability of your findings..." (p. 53). In other words, if I reach similar conclusions on effective alternative educational practices for multiple students who are alienated from the public school system, these conclusions are more likely to be applicable to a greater number of students. Therefore, the vision of an engaging education that these students and young adults help me to create will be more likely to reach a wider range of children effectively.

In contrast, Robert Stevenson (2004) explains that case study researchers should not concern themselves with generalizability, but rather consider transferability from the cases. He cites Lincoln and Guba to address transferability:

Interpretive and critical case researchers recognize that these constructs [conceptual themes or constructs of meaning] are based solely on data derived from the case(s) they studied and that they cannot make generalizations to other settings. However, by providing a rich description of the study site in addition to an analysis of the case, they may make possible the transferability... of findings to other contexts by the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). (p. 46)

In other words, case researchers are not so much concerned with generalizing their analysis to a larger population because they recognize that each situation is unique. Rather, transferability allows readers to use the information gleaned from a rich description of the case(s) to enhance their own understanding. Sharan B. Merriam (2002) further elucidates the distinction between generalizability and transferability:

... Erickson (1986) argues that since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations. It is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context. Stake (2000, p. 442) explains how this knowledge transfer works: "Case researchers, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationship-and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape- reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it... more likely to be personally usefully." (p. 179)

Case study methodology allows researchers, participants, and readers to construct meaning by adding to the dialogue about a topic. Researchers who subscribe to the constructivist paradigm do not believe that information from a case study needs to be repeatable or generalizable, but rather that the information from a case study is part of the dialogue, and the readers of case study research engage in this dialogue when they choose what aspects of a case study will inform their own understanding, and what aspects they may reject.

## **Case Study and Research Questions**

Because I wanted to understand what alienates students from school and what type of educational opportunities would enable students to connect to some type of structured learning, I felt that the best way to find out is to ask those students who I thought would be alienated from the educational system. While I also spoke with teachers, administrators, parents, and read other researchers' work, ultimately, the students are the experts of their own lives, and it is from the students that I hoped to learn most. Through questioning and co-constructing meaning, I hoped that together we could identify what might have been useful about their school experience, what might have been harmful, and what type of educational opportunities would provide some sort of connection for students, instead of alienation. What kind of school culture would students feel inspired to engage with? I chose case study because through this method, I hoped to construct meaning with my participants, rather than from them. This method flows from my constructivist and post-critical paradigms by allowing knowledge and understanding to emerge from dialogue, and by remembering that I am not an expert on the lives of the students with whom I hope to work. I cannot be certain that my ideas will be best suited for them, and I have to listen to their ideas and perceptions of education to inform my own.

## **Participant Selection**

Due to my time and travel limitations, I researched many schools within a three-hour radius of my home, hoping to find a site that looked somewhat like a school I hope to open one day. On the one hand, I wanted to find a school for students who had been

expelled or long-term suspended because I believe that to be the population with whom I will ultimately work. However, I also wanted to find a school that provides a genuine alternative to public school in terms of its philosophy, teaching methods, and curriculum, but I could not find a school that closely matched both my vision and intended population. Interestingly, the only schools that match my vision for a progressive curriculum are private schools which charge tuition, and based on the photos on their websites, the student body at these schools is not diverse, but primarily White. In addition, most schools with an alternative curriculum serve middle and elementary aged children. The options for high school students are limited, and the only alternatives that I found for students who had been expelled or long-term suspended parallels the public school in terms of curriculum and teaching methods, but the primary quality that identifies them as alternative is the small student-to-teacher ratio.

I had built a relationship of trust with the principal of a local alternative school during the year prior to my research because I had shadowed him one afternoon during my year as a principal intern. He had been extremely helpful, providing me with all kinds of information about the student body, courses, and structure of the school, and he allowed me to wander around the school alone in order to get a sense of how the school operates. I told him about my goal to open a school of my own, and although the philosophy of my school would be vary greatly from the one he runs, he was extremely supportive of my ideas, and he acknowledged that we need many options to reach a range of students.

The principal helped a great deal in terms of providing me with access to the students, and many teachers and staff expressed openness and curiosity about my research. The primary challenge regarding working in this school was the fact that the student body was so transient. Students were assigned to this school for a specific range of time; some were there for a quarter (nine weeks), some for half a year, and some for a year. Also, new students enrolled weekly; once their case went to a hearing, the judge could assign them to this school at any time throughout the year.

I presented my study to students during Language Arts classes, and I felt thrilled by how many responded positively. I told students that I wanted to interview them three times, I would shadow them for a half a day in school, and that I would like for them to take photos of their home lives, so I can learn more about how their home lives connected or didn't connect with school. I also told them that I would conduct a focus group, which I had initially hoped could be something of a pizza party, with all participants after all the interviews. However, despite what appeared to be genuine interest on the part of many students, only a few returned permission forms. I returned to the school multiple times to remind students that I needed the forms back if they were to participate; I gave out additional forms to those who lost the first ones, and in fact, some students got three or four copies. I had no demographic requirements for participation, but because the student body was at least half African American, and mostly male, I expected the participants to parallel the demographics of the school. However, while I was somewhat pleased with the diversity of students who finally returned the permission forms, I also felt concerned because no African American males agreed to participate. A few African American male

students who had expressed interest in participating had returned to their home schools before getting permission forms back to me, and so I had no way to contact them. Also, one student who returned his permission forms changed his mind when I told him that I would be asking him to take photos showing his home life. My interaction with this student is worth sharing, as I learned much from his response to my study.

I had spoken with the Language Arts teacher about my concern regarding the lack of African American male participants, and he suggested that I might try to encourage one of his new students who just came from prison, and had enrolled due to a parole or probation requirement. The teacher suggested that this student might have some valuable insights for me. When I initially presented my study to the young man, he told me that he was uncomfortable taking photos of his home life, so I said that we could skip that part; I'd just be happy to interview him a couple of times. However, when I pulled him out of class for his first interview, he asked again about the photos. He said he didn't want any teachers to see photos of his home. I thought I was reassuring him when I said that I was the only person who would see the photos, but when he asked why I wanted them, I explained that I'd like my school to be better at bridging the gap that students often face between their home culture and school culture. He said he didn't want anyone at school knowing about his home culture. He was concerned that teachers would judge him for living in a "crack house," and that they may use it against him. I acknowledged that that could happen, but I tried to explain that the school I hope to open would have teachers who are accepting and open-minded, and his home life wouldn't be scrutinized in that way. However, he responded that he thought school should be school, home should be

home, and he saw no need for the two to be bridged. He told me that he felt uncomfortable with the ideas I was expressing, and he didn't want to participate. I was so disappointed because he seemed exactly like the type of student that I was aiming to reach, but I had to accept his decision.

This experience also challenged me in terms of my expectations for my school. Although I had established positive relationships with African American males in the public high school where I taught, I had to recognize that those relationships had grown over the course of a school year; students didn't automatically trust me, and even with those students whose trust I eventually earned, that trust was limited. When I asked if I could interview one student in the class that I team-taught, purely out of my own curiosity, he said he didn't want me to hold a pencil. He didn't want his ideas recorded in any way. Despite my good intentions, and despite a positive relationship, students have learned to mistrust the power of the pen. These experiences force me to recognize that young people, especially of color, will not trust me simply because I have good intentions. I will need to work hard to earn their trust. I will need to consider my communication, educational practices, and goals carefully if I hope to entice young men, and especially young people of color to enroll in my alternative education institution.

Another incident led me to recognize that I may have unintentionally alienated potential African American male participants because of my sense of humor. When I presented my research to a group of students, predominantly African American teenage males, one student expressed interest in participating. Although he looked younger, I asked if he was under or over 18, so I would know which permission form to give him.

He answered by saying, “I’m 18. Look at my mustache.” Although I currently wax my own mustache, I didn’t always, and so without hesitation, and without thinking about implications, I responded by saying, “I used to have a mustache like yours when I was 14,” which is the age that I thought he might actually be. Although I laughed about my immediate and honest response, thinking I was quite funny, no one else in the class seemed to appreciate my humor. The young man whom I was speaking to looked absolutely horrified, and when I looked around the classroom, not only was no one laughing or smiling, but the students all looked shocked, and the White female teacher buried her head in some papers. Although I hadn’t intended to undermine this young man’s masculinity, I later recognized that I quite likely had diminished his claim to manhood, even though I thought I was being self-deprecating. I have no idea how he interpreted my statement, but no one from that class returned forms to participate in my study.

One teacher suggested that I hadn’t had time to build relationships with the students, so they had no reason to trust me, which is true. In reality, I hadn’t had time to build trust with any of the students. Ultimately, all of the participants were among the students who had been enrolled at this alternative school for at least two months, though many had been there for four to five months. I think for many participants, I simply presented something new and distracting from class, and they didn’t seem to need much in order to trust me. I suspect a few agreed to participate so they could get out of class a few times and enjoy a free pizza later. Perhaps if I had been volunteering at the school for the semester before I began my research, I would have earned the trust of more

students, but at the same time, for students who enrolled more recently before I began my research, my established presence at the school would be no guarantee of trustworthiness in their eyes.

I expected to interview only high school students, and the principal had explained to me that the high school students were mostly segregated from the middle school students, but when I shadowed one participant, her “home base” (homeroom) was mixed with middle and high school students who are identified as “Exceptional Children” (EC). I didn’t realize that her home base was mixed in this way, and since I was still hoping to recruit some African American male students, I took the opportunity to recruit two more school students, one of whom was a Latino male and one was an African American male. Although I hadn’t intended to interview and shadow middle school students, it offered me my only opportunity to speak with more male students. Additionally, because a disproportionate number of Latino males also drop out of high school, and only one Latino male had volunteered at that stage, I felt that the second Latino male could enhance my understanding, so I included both middle school students in my research.

In the end, I had eight participants: six high school students and two middle school students. Among the high school students, three boys and three girls participated. Two of the boys were White, one was Latino, one girl was Indian-American, one identified as African American, but indicated that her father was Dominican, and one female participant identified as biracial – half African American, half Latina. Two boys in middle school (8<sup>th</sup> grade) participated: one African American, and one Latino.

## **Numbers**

Because what I had read previous to starting my qualitative research, statistics I found, and my experience as a teacher in public school, initially, I expected that my participants, as well as the students who would enroll in my future school, would be primarily African American and male. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) reveals that in 2009-2010, Piedmont County Schools had 661 “dropout events,” including children in all grades. Out of the 661 dropouts, 403 were male and 256 were female. 136 dropouts were White students, 354 were African American, and 40 were identified as Hispanic. To contrast, I looked at a neighboring county, which has approximately 52,000 total students, as compared with Piedmont County, where I teach and where I conducted my research, with about 72,000 students (NC DPI, n.d., p. 8). During the school year of 2009–2010, the neighboring county had 666 “dropout events,” with 393 males and 273 females dropping out of school. Of that number, 196 dropouts were White, 276 were African-American, and 113 were identified as Hispanic. However, students who agreed to participate in my study did not quite reflect these statistics, and in fact, only one African American male participated. Ultimately, the two interactions where I felt I lost potential participants led me to reconsider the direction of my research.

Because I was aware of the fact that my background as a Jewish, White, middle-class woman from the North may have played a role in my ineffective attempts to speak with potential African American male students enrolled at this alternative school, but my background didn’t seem to cause communication breakdowns with the students who

agreed to participate, I felt that my research might be more impactful if I focused on the type of school that I hope to one day open, rather than on the types of students who I expected to serve. Furthermore, my research had revealed to me that most alternative schools that aim to serve African American males who had been kicked out or expelled from public schools generally do not stray from the standard curriculum, teaching methods, or assessment practices of public schools. However, a tradition of progressive, democratic schooling exists, and I opted to redirect my attention to the underlying philosophy of the type of education I wanted to offer. Ultimately, in this dissertation my intention is to consider the conversation that I began with my participants, as well as to join in the conversation with influential writers who envisioned, and in some cases created, democratic and/or progressive schools.

### **Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

My initial plan was to interview students three times, though in reality, I only interviewed two participants three times; the six others were interviewed twice. I recorded interviews on a digital voice recorder, and transcribed them as quickly after the interviews as possible. The first interview focused on general experiences and attitudes students had about their school, and I told participants that they could focus either the alternative or the “home school” which they had left, and to which they would most likely return next fall. After the first interview, I shadowed the participants for half a day, taking copious field notes. At times I spoke with teachers and staff, but my primary goal was to see what the participants’ day was like. I conducted follow-up interviews

where I asked participants to respond to questions about what I saw when I shadowed them. This part of my plan went rather smoothly.

On the day that I shadowed participants, I gave them disposable cameras, and instructed them to take photos of their home life. I asked them to take photos of things that were part of their daily life: their bus stop, their room, what it looks like when they look out the front door, etc. I told them that I would ask about the pictures that they took during the third interviews, and that I would give them a CD with their photos on it.

Because of multiple delays beyond my control, testing season was upon us before I could conduct my third round of interviews. The principal would not allow me to conduct any more interviews, and I hadn't received many cameras back at that time anyway, which was going to be the focus of the third interviews. I was able to conduct my focus groups, but that, too, didn't go quite as I thought it would. I hadn't had the time to secure approval to bring pizza because I hadn't had a chance to see the principal in advance, and although I eat pizza on occasion, I am aware that it is not particularly healthy, and I don't like to use unhealthy food as a reward. However, since nearly all the participants spoke at some point during our interviews about music, and since I am a music lover myself, I burned different CDs for each participant, hoping that they'd like to listen to some music that might be new to them.

Another part of my study that didn't go as planned resulted in me conducting two focus groups. Because of the complication of different schedules for the middle and high school students, I conducted two separate focus groups. However, on the day that I was conducting the focus groups, one middle school student was absent, so one of my "focus

group” meetings was more like another interview with just the one middle school student who was present that day. The high school focus group went as planned, with all six participants, and it lasted a little over an hour.

Despite multiple visits to their classes, and numerous phone calls home, only three students returned the cameras, and only two returned my calls to schedule the third interview, which occurred just before school had let out for the summer. Unfortunately, the photos were not particularly revealing. Although each camera had 24 exposures, the drug store where I got the film developed only processed six to ten photos for each camera, and most of the photos that were developed turned out blurry, overexposed, or underexposed. The final interviews with the two students who had returned cameras were quite short and didn’t feel particularly helpful.

### **Data Transformation and Representation**

After transcribing the interviews and typing up my field notes, which were initially written in longhand, I coded them based on common themes, all with an eye to my original research questions, which were: What alienates students from education? What type of educational opportunities would enable students to connect to school? Although my research questions changed as the research progressed, at this stage I was still going with my original plan, which focused on the students’ voices. I hoped to learn what underserved students need and want regarding education. Because my participants are so diverse, and because I embrace a post-critical paradigm, I employed what J. Amos Hatch (2002) identifies as a “Polyvocal analysis” to my data.

Polyvocal texts speak with multiple voices, telling multiple stories (see Doherty, Graham, & Malek, 1992; Lather, 1991b). Constructing such texts means finding ways to listen to many voices in our data and exploring ways to tell many stories in our findings. Polyvocal analysis is a tool for working with data so that polyvocal texts can be written. (p. 202)

Hatch (2002) suggests researchers employ seven steps when engaging in polyvocal analysis:

1. Read the data for a sense of the whole
2. Identify all of the voices contributing to the data, including your own
3. Read the data, marking places where particular voices are heard
4. Study the data related to each voice, decide which voices will be included in your report, and write a narrative telling the story of each selected voice
5. Read the entire data set, searching for data that refine or alter your stories
6. Wherever possible, take the stories back to those who contributed them so that they can clarify, refine, or change their stories
7. Write revised stories that represent each voice to be included (p. 202).

However, in addition to these steps, I also employed steps suggested in political analysis, including the following:

1. Write a self-reflexive statement explicating your ideological positionings and identifying ideological issues you see in the context under investigation
2. Read the data, marking places where issues related to your ideological concerns are evident
3. Study marked places in the data, then write generalizations that represent potential relationships between your ideological concerns and the data
4. Reread the entire data set, and code the data based on your generalizations.
5. Decide if your generalizations are supported by the data, and write a draft summary
6. Negotiate meanings with participant... (p. 192).

Some examples of the codes that I identified include drugs, race, boring, fun, fight, and unfair. Whenever a participant addressed one of these issues, I coded it accordingly, and then I arranged all of the quotes that address the issue together in a separate list.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Qualitative researchers consider issues of power in four primary areas: 1. the ethics of studying people who have less social power than the researcher 2. relationships with those whom we are studying, 3. methodology, 4. interpretation and representation of participants (Sprague, 2005, p. 54). Qualitative researchers choose who and what to study, and in doing so, must consider our intentions, our definitions, and our own power in naming participants. Then, in order to establish trust, qualitative researchers operating from a postcritical paradigm must be mindful of our societal power and consider how our perceptions might be more of a reflection of our status than of those whose experiences we are trying to understand. In other words, we have to recognize that where and who we are impact how we understand those who we consider different from ourselves. Despite good intentions, the methodology a researcher chooses may serve to empower or disempower those we study, and the way we analyze and write up our findings may also perpetuate justifications for inequitable systems.

Areas where researchers must consider power in the methodology we use include the process of building relationships with participants, empathy, reflexivity, and the level of involvement of the participants. For example, while some feminist researchers aim to build trust with their participants by revealing personal information about themselves, Joey Sprague (2005) explains that doing so creates a false sense of equality and does not

necessarily result in better data. “Investigators talking personally about themselves may do more to ease the discomfort of the investigators or to create the *illusion of equality* than it does to produce more valid data or empower those under the study” (p.135). On occasion, participants would ask me questions about myself or my experiences, and I would respond openly and honestly, but I believe that the difference in our ages and roles probably kept participants aware that we were not on equal footing. Whenever I met with students, I dressed like a teacher, which I felt to be the most honest way of presenting myself. Although I dress differently on days when I teach from days when I do not, I felt that going into a school in casual attire would not earn me trust among participants. Dressing too casually may, in fact, cause participants to have less trust in me. Most high school students are sensitive to adults who try to appear “cool,” by being less formal, using slang, etc., and I think they often see such attempts as fake, almost as a way of “kissing up.” Although I did not hide my tattoos or tone down my style, I came to interviews looking as professionally as I do in my own classroom. I feel that dressing professionally shows my participants that I am serious about my work, and that I respect them enough to put effort into my appearance. Rather than trying to create an “illusion of equality,” as researchers we can acknowledge our positionality, and even share relevant information in attempts to get the “best” data, but we must be careful not to use our own stories to seduce participants into a false sense of security. Participants are unlikely to be analyzing and writing up findings from revelations we share with them, but one of our primary purposes in conducting the study is to do just that with our participants’ stories.

Joey Sprague (2005) also explains that rather than interviewing many participants one time, multiple interviews of fewer participants builds trust and comfort, allows time for reflection, and enhances the interviewees' perception of their "lives and situations as historical, contextual, and changing" (p. 134). Just as people commonly think of a better comeback or funny response long after a conversation has ended, people may think of a relevant situation, or reconsider an interpretation of an event after the interview is complete. Conducting multiple interviews builds familiarity and allows participants to return to relevant issues and develop their ideas further. This, in turn will provide the researcher with more thorough, well-considered data. I found this to be the case frequently. Sometimes, without prompting, a participant would say that s/he thought about something I asked earlier, and her opinions may have shifted, either further from her original idea, or in a way that confirmed her original thought. For example, initially, Simi had pretty traditional expectations of teachers and school practices. She explained that what makes teacher good involved, "...them asking a lot of questions, them knowing the answers to all of your questions, um, a teacher should know how to explain everything, everything the right way..." and she said that what she likes about this alternative school was the practice of providing "Incentives" to students who earned enough points throughout the week.

...I think Last Chance High [pseudonym] is actually good because you get rewarded every Friday for your behavior during the week, so I think students look forward to that, so they wanna be good. And in real school, you don't get rewards, actually. You just get rewarded for making A/B honor roll or something, and you probably get candy for that but here, you get candy for reading, so it's like the teachers make the students want to do things. Like they make you want to read to earn candy or something.

However, at our focus group meeting I discussed behaviorism, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Few of the participants knew what I was talking about, so I explained how prizes and grades are forms of extrinsic motivation, and that intrinsic motivation “is when you are motivated by yourself, ‘cause you want to learn, for example.” Simi brought up how grades might not be an accurate measure of learning by explaining, “‘Cause they [teachers] always say, ‘We don’t give you the grade; you earn it.’ Maybe some students don’t feel like doing the work, so that’s what makes a grade bad, but they do know how to do it.” When we had our final interview, she discussed grades some more:

I like your idea of not having grades, but still being able to get a GED ‘cause some kids probably don’t do good with grades, like peer pressure and maybe they have problems in their household which causes them not to come to school and then fall behind, and I don’t think that’s fair for some students.

This change in opinion revealed to me that Simi had reconsidered some of what we had discussed during our interview, and, as Sprague (2005) had suggested, allowed time for further reflection.

A further component of methodology that researchers can use to mitigate the impact of unequal power between themselves and their participants is reflexivity, which Lena Alex and Anne Hammarstron (2008) define as “systematic study of the researcher within the research process in which it is important to analyse one’s position as a researcher” (p. 170). Not only must a researcher attend to the information that a participant provides in an interview, both verbal and non-verbal, but she must also attend to her own reactions, thoughts, perspectives, and ideas that arise as the interview proceeds. Lena Alex and Anne Hammarstron (2008) further state:

Reflexivity is important for awareness of the complexity of how knowledge is created.... One's own personal view of knowledge can and does affect the interpretation of research. Therefore, researchers ought to engage in reflective activity in order to account for their flashes of insight and their growth in self-awareness (Cutcliffe 2003). In so doing, reflexivity fulfills one of its purposes in qualitative research, at least in part, by enhancing the credibility of findings by taking into account the researcher's values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases.... Discursive reflection on an interview makes the researcher more conscious of being a co-creator of the narratives and situates the researcher more firmly in the research process. (p. 170)

When a researcher uses reflexivity in the process of the research, she creates space to be a participant simultaneously. While she is studying, listening to, and learning from others, she is also studying, listening to, and learning about herself. Acknowledging this in her research reveals a broad range of material and information from which she shares her findings. Ultimately, a reflexive researcher learns about herself in relation to those who she studies. Kim England (1994) comes to a similar conclusion when she says, "What I will be studying is a world that is already interpreted by people who are living their lives in it and my research would be an account of the 'betweenness' of their world and mine" (pp. 86-87).

With reflexivity, researchers can make space for empathy in their research, and empathy can have a huge impact on both the data provided by participants as well as on a researcher's interpretation and analysis of the data. Liz Bondi (2003) explains that when an interviewer can move back and forth between her own experience of the interview and the interview itself, the researcher can make more room for empathy, and doing so can aid in overcoming trust issues. She says:

What is needed of the interviewer is the capacity to understand the interviewee's feelings while simultaneously staying in touch with the difference between the other person's feelings and his or her own.... [Doing so provides] the capacity to shift between immersion and reflection, or between participating and observing, [and so] creates space in which to manage the encounter openly and respectfully. I have ascribed this oscillation to the interviewer... it is a key task of the interviewer to make this kind of psychic space - empathy – available. (pp. 70-73)

When an interviewer creates the possibility of empathy, then she can get a deeper understanding. Not only can empathy build trust, which will help a respondent to feel safe to respond with more honesty and openness, but empathy also helps a researcher to better understand what the participant is saying from a broader perspective than her own, limited frame of reference. Liz Bondi further explains:

...Empathy... can help us to reflect more productively on the richness of research relationships, including their unconscious dimensions. This is not about rendering the unconscious conscious, but about reframing issues of similarities and differences in order to use our ordinary experiences more fully, especially in our reflections on fieldwork interactions. Empathy does not expunge differences or inequalities. Rather, empathy enables people to engage in the work of communicating and understanding aspects of their experiences across a multiplicity of differences. (p.73)

By listening in a way that creates space for empathy, researchers can build relationships while simultaneously gathering more thorough data. While empathy cannot be taught, if a researcher attends to her own thoughts and feelings during an interview, then she might be able to recognize when she is listening fully, and when her mind is already analyzing, judging and interpreting. Listening empathetically is not easy, but doing so provides more insight as well as more information. In the process of interviewing my participants, I noticed that I listened to them more thoughtfully and more openly than I usually listen

to students in my classroom. I felt a deep sense of respect and curiosity, which, unfortunately, rarely showed up in my hurried classroom, where I felt too much in a rush to “cover” the material that I hoped to teach that day to really listen to my students. As much as my questions were informed by my experience as a teacher, I was surprised to discover that my role as a researcher impacted my teaching. A few participants discussed how they got frustrated at their home schools when the teacher moved too quickly from one topic to another, and in my own classroom, I recognized that I also moved too quickly for my students, and I started listening to them more.

In the end, my way of attending to trustworthiness in my research was to be as honest as possible, to ask questions for clarification, and to be as clear in my own speech as possible. I acknowledged when I didn’t understand something a participant said, and asked for clarification, and I expressed appreciation for the clarification. Interestingly, I felt that I worked hardest to earn trust among two participants who spoke about fighting more than the others. In both of those cases, I revealed that I have never been in a fight. I told them that I always avoided fights as a child, and that fights scare me. Although both participants seemed to be slightly amused by my admissions, they both opened up when I asked for more information about their experiences regarding fighting. I felt like by acknowledging my fear, although on one hand, they may have perceived me to be weak, on the other, they accepted that fighting was not a part of my life, and they were willing to tell me more about their own experiences.

## **Theoretical Research**

After the first round of interviews, I knew that seven out of the eight participants were confident that they would not drop out of school. This fact forced me to face a challenging question of values: Is the school I hope to open going to be for the underserved students who would not otherwise graduate from school, whom I see as the most in need of supportive adults? Or, on the other hand, is the school I hope to open going to be more geared towards my vision of a democratic, progressive education? Is it more important to ensure that my school focuses on successful practices with a specific population who suffer the most in public schools, or is it more important to focus on creating an education that matches my values? If my focus was to be on the type of students whom I might serve, then what research could I find that confirmed or rejected the impact of implementing democratic education with them? What I found, generally, was that alternative schools serving those who are traditionally defined as “at-risk” were not alternative in practice. Because my intention is to establish an alternative that I hope will be more relevant to students than the more-of-the-same philosophy that underlies most alternative schools, I felt the need to focus on alternative philosophies that truly provide focus and values that may look unorthodox in public schools. Rather than modeling my school on the traditional expectations of what success looks like, I wanted to discover a philosophy that reflected a vision of success more in line with my thinking, not as a measurable goal based on standardized testing, but rather, a vision for success that prepares students to actively create a more just, equitable, sustainable future.

Ultimately, my research transformed from my original qualitative study based on interviews and focus groups into a combination of qualitative and theoretical research. My research questions evolved as well. Initially, my primary research questions were: What alienates students from education? What type of educational opportunities would enable students to connect to school? However, after conducting my interviews and recognizing that these questions do not address specific values that I hold dear and intend to use as the basis of my school, my research questions became more focused so that I could have a clearer concentration on my values. As a result, my primary research question now is: How can we create a high school that promotes an engaging education around the values of peace and justice? Further questions include: How would we teach peace and justice? How can we make education engaging and inspiring to students? How would decision-making occur? What would a school with such a focus look like in terms of classes and daily practices? My methods had to evolve in order to address my research as it unfolded, and ultimately I employed a bricolage of methods. Joe L.

Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, and Shirley Steinberg (2011) explain bricolage as follows:

The bricolage can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research. Research knowledges such as ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis... combined with philosophical analysis, literary analysis... and dramatic ways of observing and making meaning constitute the methodological bricolage. In this way, bricoleurs move beyond the blinders of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production. (p. 168)

My intention in conducting my research this way is to create a dialogue among the participants of my study, the theorists of democratic and progressive schools, and my

own thoughts and experiences. By using multiple research methods, I feel more able to find answers that rely on a diversity of voices, practices, philosophies, and opinions. Employing bricolage helped me to connect the theories, philosophies, and practices that I read with the real experiences of students in an alternative school. Applying this practice enriched my understanding both of what I read in the literature and what I heard from my participants.

### **One Final Note about Methods**

Despite the fact that my initial plan was to do a qualitative dissertation, in order to attend to the reality that perhaps future students at a school that I hope to establish might not be the population that I originally envisioned, I had to consider my goals and the intention behind my research. Ultimately, I hope to open a school or some sort of educational center that would reach students who feel alienated from public school. At the beginning of my research, I assumed that my student population would be predominantly male, and also predominantly students of color, and that may still be the case, but I no longer feel so certain. Because the male students of color in the school where I conducted my research expressed resistance or lack of interest in participating in my study, I had to recognize that my school may, in fact, serve a different population. While I still think that I will work with students who feel alienated from public school, I suspect that students who may be drawn to an alternative school like the one I hope to open will be diverse in terms of demographics, and similar in terms of their resistance to the standardization currently offered in public schools.

Furthermore, although I have always had certain activities and courses in mind for this school, I wanted to understand better why I wanted to implement the curriculum options that I envision. What philosophy inspired the choices I had in mind? The qualitative research I conducted gave me the opportunity to hear students' feedback to my ideas, so I could consider the feasibility of implementing an alternative curriculum, but I needed to conduct theoretical research in order to learn more about a unifying vision behind my ideas. Ultimately, through my theoretical research, I uncover where my own ideas fit in a tradition of democratic and progressive education. Additionally, the theoretical research that I conducted also allowed me to explore alternative models, as well as alternative practices at public schools, that operate under a similar philosophy, and similar values.

## CHAPTER III

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

#### **Early Thinkers and Experimenters**

“School is both a mirror and window-it shows us what we value and what we ignore, what is precious and what is venal. Our schools belong to us, they tell us who we are and who we want to be” (Ayers, 2004, p. 8). Despite a long and quiet tradition of progressive and democratic schools in the U.S., and although our schools should reflect the values of the nation, in reality, the majority of public schools do not, in fact, belong to the citizens, or the children who spend their young lives there. Increasingly, schools belong to the politicians and corporations that earn money off the standardized tests and federally imposed curriculum. If we take Ayers at his word, then we must recognize that our national values prioritize competition, scarce resources, and standardization as more important than collaboration, creativity, and cooperation. However, since the turn of the last century, numerous educational theorists have been advocating a more democratic, progressive vision of education that reflects the more idealistic values that this nation was founded upon.

From my research, all roads lead back to John Dewey, a philosopher and educator who wrote extensively about his vision and goals for education. He argues that a society must determine the aims of education in order to create the educational system that will move in the direction of its goals. He explains (1928):

If we are satisfied upon the whole with the aims and processes of existing society, this method [determining objectives and subject matter by measurement of data] is appropriate. If you want schools to perpetuate the present order... then one type of intellectual method or "science" is indicated. But if one conceives that a social order different in quality and direction from the present is desirable and that schools should strive to educate with social change in view by producing individuals not complacent about what already exists, and equipped with desires and abilities to assist in transforming it, quite a different method and content is indicated for educational science. (p. 119)

His words ring relevant today. Some in our society, particularly those who benefit from the status quo, are satisfied with the "aims and processes of existing society," (Dewey, 1928, p. 119) but the number of children and families who do not benefit from the status quo seems to be increasing as more and more emphasis is focused on standardization and the disproportionate outcomes of our education system, based on race and class, most benefit those who already have the most privilege in our society. For people who see need for improvement in our unequal society, Dewey suggests that schools should educate children with an eye towards the desired future we hope to create. Interestingly, his vision of public school education, while looking revolutionary, also is based completely on traditional U.S. American values, such as independence, innovation, and autonomy. His argument reflects a debate we still have in the U.S. today. Conservatives argue that change challenges American values, that this nation is and should be the most competitive, and that we should continue on in the direction we currently follow. Progressives state that America could be stronger, more just, and more democratic, and argue that proactively creating changes in existing structures will lead the nation where we need to go.

Dewey was not alone in his belief that education benefits the status quo of an unequal society. Contemporaneously, In *Origin and Ideals of the Modern School*, Francisco Ferrer (1913) described the contemporary educational system of his day as “practice in domination or domestication” (chapter 9, para. 9). He explains:

... Much of the knowledge actually imparted in schools is useless, and the hope of reformers has been void because the organization of the school, instead of serving an ideal purpose, has become one of the most powerful instruments of servitude in the hands of the ruling class.... The school dominates the children physically, morally, and intellectually in order to control the development of their faculties in the way desired, and deprives them of contact with nature in order to modify them as required.... The children must learn to obey, to believe, and to think according to the prevailing social dogmas. (chapter 9, para. 9)

He recognizes that those in power do not see the benefit of education for liberation. To those for whom the current system supports, education for liberation is a dangerous challenge to their authority and power. To those in power, society looks fine, not in need of major changes. Growth simply means more: more consumption, more goods, more control, more comfort. In contrast, Ferrer feels that growth requires creativity, independence, and freedom. Ferrer (1913) states his mission for The Modern School as follows:

The mission of the Modern School is to secure that the boys and girls who are entrusted to it shall become well-instructed, truthful, just, and free from all prejudice.... We will develop living brains, capable of reacting on our instruction. We will take care that the minds of our pupils will sustain, when they leave the control of their teachers, a stern hostility to prejudice; that they will be solid minds, capable of forming their own rational convictions on every subject. (chapter 4, para. 3)

He expresses confidence that such a mission is possible in a school that is free of dogma. Educational institutions should not serve to indoctrinate students into supporting any particular religion or political philosophy. Although the Modern School existed in an anarchist community for over forty years from 1914 to 1958, in their desire not to indoctrinate children, students were not prohibited from studying any political or economic system, but rather encouraged to study any systems, and any topics that captured the children's interest. In The Modern School, the focus of education was learning how to learn, rather than learning with certain outcomes in mind.

One way that children learned to think and work out problems at The Modern School was through active participation in weekly school meetings. James Dick, a student at The Modern School at Stelton, explains how children were given the responsibility of running the school meetings. Students and adults had equal votes, and children and adults alike brought up concerns, questions, and suggestions. Dick comments about students' ideas: "The suggestions would be taken seriously and the complaints would be taken seriously. Usually, the kids were more strict than the adults would want to be." (Wunderlich, 2001, *The Stelton Modern School* [video]) These meetings reveal the adults' value of responsibility, and instilling responsibility in the children at Stelton. Children and adults shared responsibility for education. Interestingly, although Stelton was considered an anarchist school, decisions were made democratically, with the votes of all students and adults counting equally. As Susan Spayth Riley (2007) describes on the Friends of the Modern School website:

Pervasive at the Ferrer Center was the conviction that, if provided the nurturing environment and education, individuals would be free to develop maturity and self-reliance so advanced there would be no need for the restrictions of government. While there may not have been any leaders in the community, there were always principals for the school, and the will of the majority determined how the school ran. And because of the anarchists' basic respect for the differences of opinion, the Center held its doors open to those of all political persuasions and welcomed verbal contention that was the natural and expected result of such diversity. (para. 6)

Although on the one hand, children had few rules, no course requirements, and no scheduled classes, ironically, this anarchist school was much more democratic in structure than public schools today. When disputes or questions arose, the will of the majority ruled, and the voices of all constituents were heard: children, parents, teachers, and administrators. As far back as 1922, Dewey identified problems with schools run by people who are not connected with children or education. He explained:

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above. Too rarely is the individual teacher so free from the dictation of authoritative supervisor... that he can let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil's mind and the subject matter. This distrust of the teacher's experience is then reflected in lack of confidence in the responses of pupils. The latter receive their aims through a double or treble external imposition, and are constantly confused by the conflict between the aims which are natural to their own experience at the time and those in which they are taught to acquiesce. Until the democratic criterion of the intrinsic significance of every growing experience is recognized, we shall be intellectually confused by the demand for adaptation to external aims. (p. 127)

By establishing curriculum outside of the individual classroom, by allowing outside organizations, "think tanks," or corporations to standardize curriculum, teachers not only

lose their autonomy in determining what their students need to learn, but they also must ignore the reality of the children in front of them, in favor of teaching a curriculum handed to them by others outside their classroom. Rather than viewing each child as a unique individual with unique needs, learning styles, and interests, a standardized curriculum removes the teachers' ability to create the best learning opportunities for her particular classroom of unique individuals. At the same time, children understand that the point of school is to learn, but, as Dewey explains, the fact that they have no control over what they learn, and the fact that their own interests must be set aside in order to learn what outsiders have determined is vital for all children to learn, causes confusion and conflict for children. Dewey argues that until society accepts that children at every stage of development have rights to learn what is meaningful to them at that time in their development, until we respect children's curiosity as equal to, if not more important than, adults' determination of what children need to know, our educational system will serve to confuse and stifle children. Not only do adults infringe upon children's right to follow their innate curiosity, but by enforcing curriculum, we are denying them their democratic right to have a say in their own education.

Despite the fact that the U.S. was founded on a democratic philosophy, as philosophers and educators like Dewey and Ferrer reveal, children in the U.S. did not, and still do not, have the opportunity to practice participating in a democracy in terms of their education. Adults may try to instill their values on children, but when we deny children voice and decision-making authority in their own education, we reveal that democracy is not for children. Additionally, when we deny children the opportunity to

participate in creating their own education, we lose an opportunity to teach children how to think through conflicts and problems in deep, complicated, and thoughtful ways, and we deny them an opportunity to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes.

Democratic schooling not only prepares young people for active participation in a democratic society, but it engages them in their education in a way that instills central values. Democratic schooling teaches children that their voices are important, that all students' voices are equally important, and that democracy is important. When children have decision-making authority over their education, they also learn to value their education, since they become co-authors in creating their school experiences.

### **Activist Education**

Not all progressive schools work towards the same end, with the same goals in mind. Philosophers like Dewey and Ferrer focused their attention on students as individuals, viewing education as a path towards the fulfillment of individual needs. In contrast, some educational philosophers, like Myles Horton and Paulo Freire value social justice work and community building as important facets of a progressive education. The anarchist Modern School closed its doors in 1953 (Perrone, 1996, para.12). During some of its existence and beyond, in 1932 Myles Horton started an education center called Highlander, which, while serving a different population and with different aims from The Modern School, also follows the aims of improving our democracy, and Highlander Research and Education Center continues to operate today, as can be seen from its website, <http://highlandercenter.org/>. Originally named Highlander Folk School, its mission statement explains: "Highlander serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing

and movement building in Appalachia and the South. We work with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny” (<http://highlandercenter.org/>). In its early years, people came to Highlander to improve labor rights, and eventually it became a site where civil rights activists worked together to determine how to bring literacy to those who couldn’t read, and so were prohibited from voting, how to organize, and how best to improve the rights of African Americans in the South, particularly. Rosa Parks attended Highlander (Hurst, 2007, p.15) before she famously refused to give up her seat on the bus. People continue to embrace Highlander as a site for educating activists who aim to improve conditions for any group who would benefit from more democracy, more rights, and more voice. Myles Horton (1990) explains:

If you believe in democracy, which I do, you have to believe that people have the capacity within themselves to develop the ability to govern themselves. You've got to believe in that potential, and to work as if it were true in the situation. Because of this, you have to build a program that will deal with things as they are now and as they ought to be at the same time. They go together, the "is" and the "ought." Some people do all what "ought" to be, some do all what "is," but what you've got to do to be effective is do the "is" and the "ought" at the same time, or you won't be able to get practice and theory together.... You have to start where people are, because their growth is going to be from there, not from some abstraction or where you are or someone else is.... I look at them... and say to myself, how do I start moving them from where they perceive themselves to be, to where I know they can be if they work with other people and develop?.... If you have to make a choice between moving in the direction you want to move people, and working with them where they are, you always choose to work with them where they are. That's the only way you're ever going to be able to work with people and help them, because otherwise you separate yourself from them. (pp. 131-132)

Like the Modern School, which aimed to educate children where they were, Highlander strives to respect the starting point of the adults who attend its programs. Rather than force a curriculum or political belief, teachers at Highlander view their roles differently: one of their roles is to assess where the participants are in terms of identifying their problem and goals, another role is to provoke thought through asking probing questions, and yet another is to provide needed resources based on discussions. Teachers at both the Modern School and Highlander trust their students, regardless of their age, to determine their learning. Although not practiced in public schools, teacher certification programs today still encourage future teachers to start where the children are. Doing so is an act of trust that pupils will eventually get to a goal that the teacher envisions or hopes they can achieve, but ultimately, these two education centers provide freedom that allows students to start where they are, and eventually arrive at a place where they feel they have some answers, regardless of the teacher. As Horton says, if teachers do not start where the students are, then the teachers become separated from the learners, and in his view, starting anywhere other than where students are cannot provide a truly democratic and liberating education. Knowing exactly where students should end up also leaves no room for a liberating and empowering education. In order to educate for a vital, growing democratic society, we have to ensure that the education being provided offers opportunities for all participants to practice democracy, allows voices of students to participate in determining what gets taught and how the education happens, and provides guidance only as guidance, not as expertise showing how action should be taken, when, and why.

Similar to ideas that the Modern School was working against, Horton (as cited in Jacobs, 2003) explains the problems he saw with the more traditional public schools for children:

Part of the traditional inheritance is the old outmoded melting-pot concept. We are going to melt everyone down and have them all look alike, all white middle-class people, going to Sunday school, saluting the flag, buying cars.... teaching people things instead of helping them learn - transmission of congealed knowledge, most of which belongs in museums for people to go and look at like they look at a dinosaur.... This is what is wrong with education. We have accepted this technological kind of thinking to where it has got to be something that can be tested or controlled. It has to be small enough, it has to be laid out in such a way that you can know in advance what the results are going to be. And when you talk about people, talk about kids, talk about human beings as the objects of this kind of education, then it is very demeaning- a human being handled like you handle a machine with predictable results, and yet how much of our education is done that way. More and more people are becoming experts and not educators, and they are doing it because of technological thinking. And, of course, that is primarily training; that is not education. (pp. 224-225)

Although these ideas were written in 1933 as notes on educational theory, Horton's ideas are as relevant today as they were then. By providing a national, standardized curriculum, education is becoming an ever smaller, segmented, irrelevant process. Regardless of students' or teachers' interests, all children in sixth grade will learn the same information, and although the children are bombarded with information and standardized tests to ensure that they have (or have not) retained this information, students do not learn how to think, question, challenge, or critique in any meaningful way that will help them to build a more democratic, egalitarian future. Rather, they learn expectations, they learn information, and they learn facts, but they do not learn how to learn, question, or think critically. Horton argues that establishing education as a system

with predictable results will not serve to prepare society for a democratically thriving populace. Rather, educators need to listen to students, learn from students, and then challenge ideas and provide resources as deemed appropriate based on the students' desires and intentions.

Concurrently with Horton's Highlander School, Paulo Freire served as a prominent educator and philosopher in Brazil (Freire, 2006). He, too, worked with adults, though most of his students did not continue their education with the intention of becoming more effective activists or improving their rights, as was the expectation of students at Highlander. Freire educated peasants who wanted to learn how to read, but he did so in a way that respected the experiences that they came with and in a way that empowered them to effectively "read the world" while simultaneously learning how to "read the word." Freire recognized that education was never neutral, and felt powerfully that educators cannot be neutral, and that they must choose a side: they either stand with the oppressors or they stand with the oppressed. He stood with the oppressed and worked with them to improve their situation and society.

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. The oppressors use their "humanitarianism" to preserve a profitable situation. Thus they react almost instinctively against any experiment in education which stimulates the critical faculties and is not content with a partial view of reality but always seeks out the ties which link one point to another and one problem to another. (2006, pp. 73-74)

Banking education refers to the form of education that we still use predominantly in schools in the U.S., where teachers are experts who fill children's minds with the

information that they have learned. Freire contrasts banking education with a more liberatory, empowering education where students learn together with the teacher, and the wisdom that students bring with them is honored and used to pursue further studies, rather than dismissed as irrelevant, as is current practice generally in schools. By educating in this “banking” manner, Freire argues, those who are in power can more easily maintain their power. They determine what information students need to know, and anything outside of that small circle of facts is disregarded and considered less important. Rather than teaching students to follow their own creativity and curiosity, when students are told what is important and what they need to know, Freire argues, then they will lose their ability to wonder and question the world around them. This inability to think outside what is seen as standard or the status quo ultimately serves those in power because it prevents students from questioning that power or the injustice that surfaces as a result of unequal power.

### **Public Schools as Sites for Brainwashing and Other Possibilities**

Although both Myles Horton and Paulo Freire worked with adult students, their ideas have been extremely powerful in terms of opening up possibilities for a more active, engaging, empowering, and ultimately liberating education. While the U.S. was transforming as the result of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War, in the 60s and 70s many education theorists revisited ideas to create schools that would be more liberating and would address the unequal outcomes that resulted from unequal education. Free schools were opening to counter the standardization seen in public schools, and for a small window of time people were open

to reconsidering the role and purpose of school as something other than preparation for future employment.

As Freire saw the banking concept of education as ultimately serving the oppressors, Ivan Illich (1971) viewed public education as an institution that perpetuated an unjust and undemocratic system. He argues that institutions create institutionalized thinking, and serve to dehumanize and to an extent enslave those who have taken part in them.

School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.... When values have been institutionalized in planned and engineered processes, members of modern society believe that the good life consists in having institutions which define the values that both they and their society believe they need. Institutional value can be defined as the level of output of an institution. The corresponding value of man is measured by his ability to consume and degrade these institutional outputs, and thus create a new-even higher-demand. The value of institutionalized man depends on his capacity as an incinerator. (pp. 113-114)

Illich is arguing here that the institution of school itself makes people think that they need school, but in reality, he questions the importance of the role of schools other than to prepare children to accept the status quo. Through schools, he argues, society learns how the world works, and why the systems and practices that are used are the best and most important. Children don't learn, instead, how to consider alternatives or question why the systems and structures in place exist, or to consider who benefits from them and who is hurt by them. Rather, they learn that the institutions are good, and the more an individual can get out of the institution, the better his life will be. The more an individual can

consume, the better his life will be, and the more important he will seem in a society that values consumption over cooperation.

Like Freire and Illich, George Counts describes the purpose of public education as serving the interests of those in power, but he too envisions opportunities for public education to serve as a vehicle to inculcate children with values of equality and freedom.

Counts (1980) argues:

The purpose of popular education ... is easily discernible. The major function of the school [in a class-oriented society] would be to inculcate into the minds of the rising generation the idea that the existing institutions, including practices with respect to the distribution of wealth and income, power, privilege and opportunity, were expressions of the immutable laws of human nature. (p. 49)

Awards assemblies and incentive programs show that this inculcation of values continues today. We still teach children that those who can learn school material relatively easily, and who agree to do so, deserve awards in the form of grades and recognition at assemblies. When awards are scarce, as they generally are, competition arises, so rather than celebrate and honor students working together to accomplish a shared goal, we teach children that there can only be one number one. Only a limited number of people will be rewarded with a certificate and/or a big paycheck. However, Counts (1980) argues, education does not need to teach such lessons. Instead, it could teach other, democratic and liberatory lessons:

The aim of public education now should be, not to elevate A above B or to lift gifted individuals out of the class into which they were born and to raise them into favored positions where they may exploit their less fortunate fellows, but rather to abolish all artificial social distinctions and to organize the energies of the nation for improving the condition of all. In industrial society men do not and cannot

live alone. The school should be permeated, not with the competitive, but with the cooperative, spirit. It should strive to serve society as a whole, to promote the most inclusive interests. This does not mean that it would refuse to give knowledge and competence to the individual, but rather that with knowledge and competence it would give a strong sense of social obligation. It would then be concerned primarily not with the promotion of individual success, but with the fullest utilization of the human resources of the country for the advancement of the general welfare. The result, moreover, would not be to deny the individual the joys attending successful accomplishment. On the contrary, his successes would be as genuine as ever and might even be far more profound and satisfying than they are when recorded in purely personal terms. (p. 51)

Rather than focus on the rewards given to individuals, Counts suggests that adults need to teach children to use their talents to lift others up, to help others so that they, too, can experience success. Learning and success should not be seen as scarce resources, available only to a privileged few, but rather as a reward and an obligation. With success comes responsibility. If adults focus more energy on promoting a cooperative and collaborative education, then society will move forward in a more just, egalitarian, and life-giving direction.

### **Contemporary Thought and Practice**

Unfortunately, adults do not yet focus our attention on promoting a cooperative education, and instead, in general, we demand children to listen passively and obediently to teachers. Whoever remembers the material best, earns the best scores in school. In his book *Teaching as a subversive activity*, Neil Postman (1969) describes what children actually do in school. Unfortunately, his description is as apt today as it was when he wrote it:

...What is it that students *do* in the classroom? Well, mostly, they sit and listen to the teacher. Mostly, they are required to believe in authorities, or at least pretend

to such belief when they take tests. Mostly, they are required to *remember*. They are almost never required to make observations, formulate definitions, or perform any intellectual operations that go beyond repeating what someone else says is true. They are rarely encouraged to ask substantive questions.... It is practically unheard of for students to play any role in determining what problems are worth studying or what procedures of inquiry ought to be used. (p. 19)

It is still the case that in most classes that have standardized exams throughout the year, such as English, math, science, and social studies, students do generally sit still and listen to the teacher, or at least pretend to listen. Although teachers now may offer more projects that incorporate some sort of craft and/or presentation, the ultimate assessment remains the standardized exam, which is a test of facts, formulaic processes, and vocabulary that children have been required to memorize. Children still have no say in determining the problems worth studying, but the difference between school now and when Postman wrote, is that today, even teachers have minimal say in what problems are worth studying or procedures for studying them. All is determined by a federal curriculum that has been handed down to teachers. Currently 45 states and Washington D.C. follow the Common Core Curriculum, which provides “standards” for math and language arts classes (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, the Common Core website describes the language arts standards as follows:

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully

through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic.

Although these standards sound reasonable, students' ability to "meet the Standards" is still measured by standardized multiple choice exams. As beneficial as any externally imposed curriculum may be, the effect of using high stakes multiple choice exams to determine if a student has successfully met the standard reduces the content of any classroom to superficial learning. Additionally, tying teachers' evaluation and pay to students' test scores serves to diminish classroom learning into test-taking practice.

Diane Ravitch (2010), once a proponent of No Child Left Behind, saw the impact that the testing regime was having on students and teachers, and she came to recognize that testing is not the same as curriculum, and that a high quality education is not measurable:

Perhaps most naively, it [No Child Left Behind] assumed that higher test scores on standardized tests of basic skills are synonymous with good education. Its assumptions were wrong. Testing is not a substitute for curriculum and instruction. Good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools. (pp. 110-111)

In an attempt to hold teachers accountable for student learning, bureaucrats have taken teachers' expertise out of the classroom. In tested classes, this means that teachers cannot work from the baseline of what students know or their interests, but rather must start at the same baseline as every other teacher of that subject at that time of the year. Not only is such a process random and superficial, but as it alienates teachers from the content of

their classroom, it further alienates students from learning, and also alienates teachers from their students as teachers are pressured to “deliver” good test scores. Postman (1969) describes aptly what is learned in such standardized classrooms:

...Just about the *only* learning that occurs in classrooms is that which is communicated by the structure of the classroom itself.... Passive acceptance is a more desirable response to ideas than active criticism. Discovering knowledge is beyond the power of students.... Recall is the highest form of intellectual achievement, and the collection of unrelated "facts" is the goal of education. The voice of authority is to be trusted and valued more than independent judgment. One's own ideas and those of one's classmates are inconsequential. Feelings are irrelevant in education. There is always a single, unambiguous Right Answer to a question. English is not History and History is not Science and science is not Art and Art is not Music, and Art and Music are minor subjects and English, History and Science major subjects, and a subject is something you "take" and, when you have taken it, you have "had" it, and if you have "had" it, you are immune and need not take it again. (pp. 20-21)

Described this way, it is easy to see the sense of Illich's observation that school is an advertising agency promoting its own value, but when looked at with curiosity, one can easily question the value of the education being provided to children. When I shadowed Simi, one of the participants in my study, during a few classes she sighed and said, “This is boring.” Her teachers generally ignored her, but one responded, “School is supposed to be boring.” I asked another participant, LeLe, “What would make students more engaged and inspired in school?” She responded, “If we didn't feel like it was so boring. We're hearing the same thing over and over again. And we're getting lectured.” John concurred: “School is typically so boring you just want – you'd rather sleep.” When I asked Joaquin about the best part of school, he answered, “The muffin in the morning. Nothing really exciting happens here.” The education offered now does not serve to

build a better future, prepare children for collaboration and critique, increase equality or freedom, but rather stifles any thought that does not fit the predetermined curriculum. Children are not encouraged to discover knowledge or consider feelings, but rather, only to uncover the one right answer. Recall is of primary importance, while the interests of children (and teacher) are pushed aside since they will not be on the test.

When students ask why they need to know something, they are revealing their lack of interest in it. If the teacher's response is that it's on the test, then that statement tells children that the test is more important than their own interests. If her response is that they need a good grade to get into college, and they need college to get a good job, then children learn that their future depends on learning something that is not necessarily interesting or relevant to them now, that they may forget after the test, and that education is just a game one must play in order to get a good job, which is the only way to live a worthwhile life, all of which makes a pretty good advertisement for school.

Much of the critique of public education that has been made in the past still holds true today, and in fact, feels more relevant and more urgent as the increasing push for standardization and accountability impacts every public school classroom in the nation. Although critical thinking skills are now given lip service by bureaucrats and administrators, in reality, when so much depends upon the results of multiple choice standardized exams, clearly the language of critical thinking has been appropriated and transformed into meaninglessness. For example, teachers in Piedmont County Schools are evaluated on a number of practices, one of them being their ability to teach critical thinking skills. The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (2013) explain:

Teachers help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers encourage students to ask questions, think creatively, develop and test innovative ideas, synthesize knowledge and draw conclusions. They help students exercise and communicate sound reasoning; understand connections; make complex choices; and frame, analyze, and solve problems. (p. 6)

Like the standards of the Common Core Curriculum, these standards appear to be quite reasonable. Teachers should encourage students to ask questions, think creatively, develop and test innovative ideas. However, when the curriculum and assessment is provided by an outside organization, in reality, teachers rarely have time to allow for creativity and questioning. Rather, teachers are told what they should be teaching on any given day. That way, if a student moves from one state to another, the idea is that she won't have to struggle to figure out what she might have missed because the content of her new class should be picking up right where the content of her class at her former school left off. So, while teachers may encourage students to ask questions, the questions will have to be limited to ones with simple answers and those that don't require outside research. Furthermore, teachers have no time to allow students to "develop and test innovative ideas" if those ideas are not part of the prepared curriculum. Finally, if teachers are asking students to think critically, then their conclusions should vary, but in reality, by focusing so much attention, class time, and money on multiple choice high-stakes standardized assessments, those involved in education are saying one thing but demanding another. One side of the mouth is saying, "Think critically, be creative," but the other side, and the side that weighs more heavily in the school experiences of children says, "There is only one right answer."

At the middle schools where I have worked, after the administration of benchmark exams, which are exams given two times a year before the final exam, teachers and students are expected to thoroughly analyze the results. Scored exams are returned to students, and teachers instruct them to find the questions that they answered incorrectly, and make a note of the skill that the question tested. For example, one such skill might be determining the main idea, or another could be making inferences. Students are expected to notice any patterns in their incorrect answers, and to focus their attention on improving in those skills. According to administrators, this practice will increase students' "buy-in," and inspire them to improve, but in reality, the practice more often simultaneously bores and shames children. Not only that, but it does nothing to encourage children to ask questions, think creatively, or develop and test innovative ideas. In our data-driven school culture, teachers are rated on children's test scores, not their creativity and curiosity.

Although teachers may be evaluated on their ability to develop critical thinking in their students, they are also evaluated based on the results of their students' test scores. Because of the focus administrators place on data and data-driven instruction, teachers rely on test results to determine what basic skills students may need additional instruction with, and rather than seeing the children's needs from a holistic perspective which takes into account the students' needs and interests, teachers are urged to focus energy on improving test scores through drills and test-taking strategies. Rather than incorporate critical thinking skills into daily lessons, teachers, especially of students in lower track classes, feel pressure to ensure that their students can find the one right answer.

In the search for the one right answer, education has become less than what it could be. Rather than viewing education as a life-giving opportunity to grow intellectually, socially, and spiritually, high-stakes standardized exams diminish the intrinsic value of education. Instead, education becomes a required step on the path to economic stability, despite the fact that having an education is no guarantee to economic stability. H. Svi Shapiro (2006) reflects a view of schooling that mirrors Postman's view forty years ago.

We are told, repeatedly, as we grow up, that education's real value is not in its capacity to draw us toward wisdom and understanding, or to make us thoughtful and socially responsible citizens, or to develop our potential as creative and imaginative beings. The overriding purpose of education is that it provides us with a commodity that we are able to exchange for a place in college, a better job, a promotion, a mortgage, a car loan, and so on. In other words, it is not the intrinsic experience of education that we value-what it offers to us as human beings and as members of a community. Education, instead, is something we "get" if we do what is required of us so that we can then cash it in for the pleasures and relative security of a middle-class life. (p. 41)

When children ask teachers why they need to know a lesson, teachers can't claim that the material will bring them any wisdom or deep understanding. Again, this is the result of having a curriculum imposed from "above," with little to no input from actual classroom educators. When teachers are alienated from the content they teach, they cannot give an honest and inspiring answer to such questions. Rather, they have to answer in materialistic terms: a good grade now, a good job later, a chance at economic stability as an adult, though we don't even address the fact that this expectation is our hope for students, but no guarantee. As the most recent economic recession shows, even for those who have played the game, done everything "right," behaved as expected, having an

education, even an advanced education, is no guarantee for a stable future. If, instead, educators focused their attention on bringing their charges closer to wisdom and understanding, as Shapiro suggests, our classrooms and schools would have to not only look different, but also be different.

### **Re-envisioning Education**

Henry Giroux explains in Peter McLaren's (1997) *Revolutionary multiculturalism: Pedagogies of dissent for a new millennium* that in addition to critiquing current practices, educators need to move from critique to establishing a new vision of education (p. 19). One area where educators need to reexamine instruction, he argues, is in how we approach texts. He elaborates:

Students need to learn how to read not as a process of submission to the authority of the text but as a dialectical process of understanding, criticizing, and transforming. They need to write and rewrite the stories in the texts they read so as to be able to more readily identify and challenge, if necessary, how such texts actively work to construct their own histories and voices. Reading a text must be a way of learning how to choose, how to construct a voice, and how to locate oneself in history. This amounts to intervening differently in one's own self formation and the self formation of others. (p. 30)

Rather than accepting the authority of the text, any text, Giroux argues that students need to learn to read in a way that includes their own experience as part of a dialogue with the text. Reading in such a way operates to challenge the notion of one right answer because reading as a dialogue means that the reader's experiences are as valid and important as the words on the page. Additionally, reading critically helps students understand the perspective, biases, frames of reference, and culture of the writer while simultaneously gain a better understanding of their own location in terms of the text. In other words, the

text is no longer the authority. Instead, the text becomes a site of questioning: what is the perspective of the writer? What is his location in terms of privilege and power? What is the main purpose of the text, and its intended audience? What does the writer neglect to consider? The best way to assess a student's ability to think critically is to listen to his questions, not his answers.

As other educators who strive to transform our education system into one that promotes justice and democracy, Shapiro (2006) suggests that educators need to reconsider education by starting with the needs and interests of the learners. Not only will doing so engage students, but, he argues, it will also serve to improve our democracy.

...Authentic learning is the process in which a student seeks answers to his or her concerns, and struggles to give meaning to his or her own experience. The search for meaning can be never separated from real and compelling learning.... Such learning is always filled with human energy, passion, and the flow of our creative juices. It is also usually accompanied by the noise of dynamic human interaction and dialogue.... A vibrant democracy ultimately depends on human beings who have been educated in ways that emphasize their capacity for being creative and thoughtful citizens. Such individuals learn to see that our world can be reinvented and changed, not simply received as something we must adapt or conform to. (p. 109)

By re-envisioning education as a process for students to seek answers to their own questions, rather than questions that have been chosen by the teacher or an outside "expert," Shapiro suggests that education should not be a top-down, hierarchical, factory-like experience, but rather, more like a workshop or egalitarian gathering where students are empowered and encouraged to ask their own questions and find their own answers in a community of peers. Maria described one of her fun classes as one where she had the

opportunity to make lots of projects. “Like, we’ll do stuff, like we made maps and stuff out of candy.” She elaborated:

Or we’ll do like a lot of coloring, it’s not, it sound childish, but we’ll do a lot of like, research and stuff, but we had to put color in.... It’s like actually, you’re learning stuff, but it’s fun at the same time.

Simi described her sociology class, before she enrolled in Last Chance High, as a fun class. She explained:

Sociology was actually pretty fun. We always did, like, different activities with the work, like we would play different games that had to do with the subject, and we’d learn about everybody else, and how everybody else was, and we learned about different types of people in the classroom. And we learned, like, everybody’s not the same. We just did fun stuff, you know, to learn about what others did.

Allowing room for, and in fact encouraging creativity and deep thinking, Shapiro (2006) suggests, will not serve to undermine our democracy, but will work to improve it because rather than feeling hopeless to create change where change may be needed, students who have experienced a more collaborative, open-ended education will allow children to have the habits of mind to question, to think creatively, and to feel empowered to take chances.

Although students would benefit from seeking answers to their own questions, Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (2008) suggest that teachers can and should pose questions for students, but that those questions should be relevant to the students’ lives because the questions the teachers pose should be based on the experiences of students. For example, Cammarota and Fine describe what they call “Youth Participatory Action

Research” as “emancipatory knowledge” which provides an outlet for youth to positively impact their community.

Through participatory action research, youth learn how to study problems and find solutions to them. More importantly, they study problems and derive solutions to obstacles preventing their own well-being and progress. Understanding how to overcome these obstacles becomes critical knowledge for the discovery of one’s efficacy to produce personal as well as social change. Once a young person discovers his or her capacity to effect change, oppressive systems and subjugating discourses no longer persuade him or her that the deep social and economic problems he or she faces result from his or her own volition. Rather, the discovery humanizes the individual, allowing him or her to realize the equal capabilities and universal intelligence in all humans, while acknowledging the existence of problems as the result of social forces beyond his or her own doing. (pp. 6-7)

While the problems may be posed by teachers, the students actively strive to learn more about the problem through their own independent research, increasing their understanding of the problem often by conducting research in their own communities. If the problems are truly focused on students’ well-being and progress, then it seems clear that the education offered will be engaging and relevant. Additionally, when young people understand the systems in place that have created unequal educational opportunities as well as unequal distribution of resources, they will be able to understand that their struggles are not the result of their own making, but rather, they are experiencing the impact of generations of oppression and injustice. Understanding this, while disheartening on the one hand, can also be empowering, because it allows young people to consider the possibility of creating systemic change where previously their problems may have seemed both insurmountable and simultaneously of their own making. Cammarota and Fine (2008) further explain:

The pedagogical philosophy on which YPAR [Youth Participatory Action Research] is based derives from Freire's (1993) notion of praxis—critical reflection and action. Students study their social contexts through research and apply their knowledge to discover the contingent qualities of life. Thus, the important lesson obtained from engaging in this pedagogical praxis is that life, or more specifically the students' experiences, are not transcendental or predetermined. Rather, praxis reveals how life experiences are malleable and subject to change, and the students possess the agency to produce changes. (p. 6)

When students' lives are connected to an education which provides experiences in actual research based in their home communities, then they are much more likely to see their education as authentic and relevant. Young people will learn to look at the systems and structures that surround their lives with a critical eye, to question them, and to think creatively and collaboratively about ways to make positive changes, which, even in the face of potential failure would be empowering and educative. Because the failure is not the measurement of a standardized test, but rather a failed attempt at establishing change, then young people can see it as an opportunity for growth, rather than simply a reflection of their own incompetence or understanding.

### **In the Shadows**

My path has been one of privilege and, to a large extent, mainstream, middle-class White American culture. I went from public school to a state university, eventually to be followed with another state university to pursue my Master's degree, and finally, yet another state university for my PhD. Although I hated junior high (as it was known at the time) and high school, I was able to play the game successfully, and I knew I had to "succeed" if I hoped to go on to college, as was expected of my sister and me. High school was a bore, and I felt I was just biding time until I could get out into the "real

world,” when I would leave my parents’ home and begin college. One of my most distinctive memories from college occurred as I was reading an assignment for an honors English class. Suddenly I recognized that I had never been taught to read in the way that my professors were encouraging. In my third year of college, I learned to feel a profound love of reading. I had always been a pretty good reader, but not an active one, and I felt a little bit angry that I hadn’t learned to read so deeply previously. This experience gave me a new appreciation for my 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher who tried her best to challenge her students to think outside the box, but as it was the first time anyone asked me to think deeply, I didn’t understand what she was pushing for. I sensed her frustration and disappointment. She told us that because we were honors students, she expected more from us, but despite her efforts, my peers and I hadn’t yet learned how to think deeply, read actively, or question anything or anyone.

For students for whom college is not part of their lives, and will not likely be part of their lives, by focusing on a curriculum that is alienating to teachers and students, not only are we as a society doing a disservice to our youth, but we are limiting their potential for learning how to learn. A lucky few may have the experience of authentic and deep learning in college, but if we could transform public schools into places where children learn how to think deeply, read actively, and ask questions, then at least all children could have some experience of genuine, profound, even life-changing education.

In reading for preparation for this chapter, I feel like I have uncovered a shadow side of public school. Despite over 20 years of formal education, I had never known that I was not being educated for democracy, but rather, for obedience and to secure my

privilege. I had heard of John Dewey, but I didn't know much more than his name and how to use the card catalogue, which I learned to use in public school. Similar to my feeling in college, where I felt suddenly aware that I had never been taught to read actively and with a deep relationship with words, learning about the education debates and experiments that have been taking place for over a hundred years, I feel simultaneously relieved and angry. Now I realize that my frustrations and dreams of a different type of education from what exists in public schools lies within a long tradition of like-minded activists, idealists, and philosophers. Unfortunately, that debate is not made prominent for educators or the public to explore or consider. Instead, administrators, policy-makers, education departments, and educators rarely discuss the most important purpose of education, and instead, our time is used in measuring accountability through test scores. How can we teach deep thinking to our youth when adults in classrooms, school systems, and departments of education don't engage in the deep questions behind the purposes of education?

The ideas behind democratic and progressive education reveal quintessentially American ideals: equality, justice, democracy, freedom, and empowerment. How is it that despite the fact that these ideals are often used to describe this country, educators have little opportunity to try to actually, actively teach these values in the classroom? We know, for example, that public schools are not providing equal opportunities for all children when we look at statistics. Although I do not believe that the most important aspects of education are measurable, looking at test scores, drop-out statistics, and suspension and expulsion rates, one can easily see that despite our best efforts, public

schools do not serve all children equitably. So, although African American and Latino students tend to test less successfully than their White peers, rather than look at the tests or teaching methods with a critical eye, teachers tend to focus on re-teaching and teaching test-taking skills to the low-scoring students, in effect blaming the students for their poor performance, rather than turning the gaze inward. Such practice does nothing to promote equity or justice, and often, instead, serves to reaffirm unequal outcomes.

Progressive educators have a different perspective on the goals of education. Instead of focusing on test scores and other data, progressive educators and those who promote a democratic education consider other immeasurable components of a successful education, and this has been the case at least since Dewey's time, if not longer. Such educators consider successful education to be reflected not by test scores, future incomes, or college attendance, but rather, successful education would be reflected in a society that works together to resolve conflict, collaborates to solve problems, and in a society where individuals feel empowered to work towards making just, equitable communities where all members have opportunities for success as well as failure. Failure would be accepted as a valid and worthwhile learning experience, and people who experience failure would be supported and encouraged to reflect on the failure as an opportunity for growth and future success.

I started this chapter with a quote from William Ayers (2004): "School is both a mirror and window-it shows us what we value and what we ignore, what is precious and what is venal. Our schools belong to us, they tell us who we are and who we want to be" (p. 8). Progressive and democratic educators would like schools to reflect that in the

U.S., our values are democracy, equity, and justice, as our founding documents claim. Rather than being too fearful to actually implement these values in public education, or too content with authoritarianism, mediocrity, injustice, standardization, and inequality, democratic and progressive educators have been, and will continue to prepare future generations to live closer to the ideals that this nation was built upon.

## CHAPTER IV

### PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION - PRACTICED AND IDEAL

I started this PhD program with a vague feeling that public education was not truly for the benefit of all students. I had more negative feelings about my first years of teaching than positive, but what I identified as negative was nebulous, and I recognized that my perspective was limited. For example, I knew that I didn't like the students' behavior, generally, but I didn't know why they were behaving as they did. I was surprised by students' apparent lack of interest in education, and specifically their negative attitudes towards reading and writing, but I was also surprised by the way that they spoke to me. I didn't understand the students' behavior because I had not seen anything similar when I attended school. In my days as a public school student, even if the students who were considered troublemakers didn't do their assignments, they rarely spoke back to teachers or showed overt defiance. As a new teacher, I had a student tell me that I had to give her a certain grade, and I had another student yell curses at me as she got up and walked out of class without permission. Students complained at nearly every assignment, and they rarely did what I asked of them at my first request; I had to beg and plead with them to open their books in a literature class. When I suggested that they read with a dictionary nearby so they could look up words they didn't know, students looked at me incredulously. I assumed they all had dictionaries at home and

further assumed that they enjoyed learning new words. After the first round of report cards, I was told by an administrator that I couldn't give so many failing grades. When I explained that students weren't submitting their homework, she suggested that I give them class time to make up their missing grades. I felt strongly that I was maintaining high expectations of my students, as was taught in my teaching certification classes, regardless of their having been tracked into a CP class. Ultimately, however, I stopped giving homework since few students turned in the assignments, and that was the cause of the low grades.

I didn't know how to inspire a more positive attitude towards school without understanding what inspired the behavior I saw, and I knew that I wanted to try something different in an alternative educational system that I had not seen yet. I started the PhD program thinking that I understood what I disliked, and I hoped that through my studies, I could learn to build a more positive vision for a school that students and I would like, and even love. Instead, I learned in more depth why I struggled with the lessons learned in public schools. Primarily, I learned about the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1979 & 1982; Giroux, 2009; Illich, 1971; Paris, 1995; Shapiro, 2006), and how public schools have been impacted by neoliberalism.

In this chapter, I will discuss the philosophy that underlies current practices in public school as well as the philosophy of democratic and progressive education. Finally, I will address the philosophy of the school that I'd like to open, which is inspired by democratic and progressive education. Because my desire to open a school started with a sense of what I didn't like about the public school system, and from there has grown into

a positive vision of what I would like to create, this chapter will be organized in a similar manner. The guiding philosophy is inspired by writings discussing democratic and progressive education, words that I have seen used interchangeably, and I will address specific areas that make an education democratic, such as authentic learning, social justice, and multicultural studies. Additionally, I will discuss an area that is not generally considered part of progressive or democratic education, but that I feel is an important component of educating children to be empowered citizens who can work effectively to create the future they envision, and that relates to spirit-learning.

### **Neoliberalism**

Although school leaders and politicians may not claim that neoliberalist policies guide educational decisions, and may not even be aware that neoliberalism guides many arguments about how to create an effective education, the decisions that political leaders are making that impact public schools do, in fact, reflect a neoliberalist philosophy. Marta Baltodano (2012) explains both neoliberalism and its effect on public schools in great depth. First, she explains that the needs of the market take control of the political sphere:

Neoliberalism takes control of the political sphere and subsumes it entirely to the needs of the market. The individual citizen becomes a homo oeconomicus and every single area of social, cultural, and political life is reduced to the simple economic principles of cost-benefit, production, and efficiency (Brown 2003, 9). (p. 493)

Schools' discipline policies reveal one specific area where neoliberalism is evident. As a part of many classrooms' and schools' discipline policy, each of the four schools in

Piedmont County where I have taught follows the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, where teachers give out a form of school currency when they find students behaving well. Students can then either use this currency to purchase treats at a school store, or in some cases the tickets or currency are put together in a random drawing where winning students can get prizes. In this way, students' sense of belonging, their sense of value, must be earned through appropriate behavior and will be compensated through some sort of prize or recognition. If I happen to comment on students' focus on classwork, inevitably a student will ask for a "PAWS," which is my current school's form of currency. This practice uncovers one lesson that students learn from the hidden curriculum, which refers to the lessons a school teaches children, not through content, but through school practices and culture. The custom of offering prizes and recognition for good behavior teaches children that only certain students and only certain behavior brings rewards. Challenging the status quo, questioning the value of content, and attempting to establish one's personal power will not earn a student prizes, but rather will most likely cause trouble. The hidden lesson to students is if they behave, they will earn the right to some type of reward. Not only is this practice antithetical to democratic learning, but it prohibits students from asking challenging questions about their education, and it prevents them from making authentic decisions about their education.

In terms of learning, students learn to view school as a cost-benefit operation. When teachers explain how various assignments will be weighted as compared with other assignments, students often calculate how much effort they need to expend in order to

earn the grade that they want. H. Svi Shapiro (2006) describes how his daughter, along with her classmates, learned to think about school learning as a practice in statistics.

She was able to maintain, in her head, a complex accounting of her current grades in any subject, feeding into them all the various permutations relating to the numerical weight of different assignments, quizzes, exams, and other course requirements. Like all of the students around her, she was able to rapidly discern the best way to distribute her energies with the greatest efficiency, to maximize the numbers and grades in her classes. (p. 9)

Participants in the high school focus group revealed that sometimes the grade simply wasn't worth the effort. When I asked students if they needed grades to know if they've learned something, Joaquin explained, "Yeah, that's always my problem because my grades are always dropped because I ignore the projects." For Joaquin, the projects weren't worth the effort, and he accepted a lower grade as a consequence. His grade, he understood, was not a reflection of his learning or comprehension, but rather showed his lack of interest, both in the projects assigned, and the impact it had on his grade.

Similarly, Simi said, "Yeah, I think that school, at school it's about getting the grade. Really, it should be about actually learning it and knowing it." Rather than consider the assignment as a learning opportunity, the assignment becomes a calculation: is it worth the time and effort to get the highest grade? Or, on the other hand, can the student relax on this assignment because it won't count that much towards a final grade? Students do not view assignments, projects, and presentations as learning opportunities, but rather, as a means to an end, with the "end" referring to the grade, not the education.

When applied to education, we can see that neoliberalism also makes its appearance in the educational sphere by offering "school choice." While the idea of

school choice may be appealing, what remains unsaid is that neoliberalist policies ultimately hurt public schools. School choice and voucher programs may sound good, but in reality, they take resources away from public schools and create a consumer mentality about school (Ambrosio, 2013). For example, if a family does not like their public school, they can send their child to a private or charter school, which is not accountable in the same way that public schools are, and due to recent political decisions, the money that would go with that child to the public school, now goes with her to a private school. However, private schools and charter schools are at a great advantage when it comes to claiming success. Diane Ravitch (2010) explains:

...In reality, the regular public schools are at a huge disadvantage in competition with charter schools. It is not only because charter schools may attract the most motivated students, may discharge laggards, and may enforce a tough disciplinary code, but also because the charters often get additional financial resources from their corporate sponsors, enabling them to offer smaller classes, after-school and enrichment activities, and laptop computers for every student. Many charter schools enforce discipline codes that would likely be challenged in court if they were adopted in regular public schools; and because charter schools are schools of choice, they find it easier to avoid, eliminate, or counsel out low-performing and disruptive students. (pp. 136-137)

Ultimately, middle-class and upper-class students who have the resources can leave public schools in favor of the private or charter schools, and the money that would go to public school, thanks to neoliberal policy, now follows them to their private school. Additionally, the vouchers often do not cover all of the expenses of a private or charter school. If parents cannot make up the difference, then their children do not have the same range of options as those children who were lucky enough to be born to wealthier families. The public schools lose the money that went with children who enrolled in

private or charter schools, and an additional burden remains that the public schools are left with more students who need more resources and whose families cannot afford to cover fees that the vouchers do not, so the public schools work with the most needy families and children, but with fewer resources now that the public is funding all schools, not just the public schools. Creating the appearance of school choice leaves some children with little choice but to make due in an overburdened school system (Paris 1995; Apple, 1982). Furthermore, Diane Ravitch (2010) argues that charter schools do not share the same goals as public schools, and that charters ultimately hurt public schools by taking away both resources and successful students.

In their current manifestation, charters are supposed to disseminate the free-market model of competition and choice. Now charters compete for the most successful students in the poorest communities, or they accept all applicants and push the low performers back into the public school system. Either approach further disables regular public schools in those communities by leaving the lowest-performing and least motivated students to the regular public schools. (p. 146)

Since the money follows the child, and because charter schools have unfair advantages over public schools in terms of its rules and practices, public schools lose. Public schools must accept all students and have nowhere to send “low performers.” The test scores of students at public schools are bound to be lower in such a scenario, and then to label the school as failing adds insult to injury.

Baltodano (2012) continues to explain how neoliberalism impacts education by explaining that neoliberalism isn’t merely laissez faire capitalism, where the government

does not interfere with the practices of the market, because the government does, in fact, intervene in various social institutions in order to support the needs of the market:

Neoliberalism as a political rationale does not mean laissez faire capitalism. In this form of governmentality, there is always active political intervention and manipulation of all the social institutions, from the media, the law, the arts, schools, and universities, to the most important protagonist of all, the state (Brown 2003, 9). (p. 493)

Neoliberalist policies do not simply let the market work out problems, kinks, or inequities, but rather support certain businesses and institutions at the expense of others. Creating vouchers allows the government to create a consumer mentality about schools, and one impact is that public schools lose the financial support that they once had.

Additionally, since the Common Core State Initiative was established in 2012 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) public schools in states that have received federal money in exchange for following the Common Core curriculum do not have the freedom to create their own curricula and assessment in that state's public schools. The Common Core Standards are as follows:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

The issue is not, however, explicitly with the standards, or even the assessments, but rather the larger concern is that the Common Core replaces the expertise of educators in their classrooms with a federally mandated curriculum that is largely unfunded, has not been field tested before implementation, and does not serve struggling students. For example, in order to implement the assessments that are connected to Common Core, schools are required to have the most updated operating systems on their computers, since the assessments are computer-based. However, many school systems are underfunded in terms of resources, and do not have the money necessary to update their computers. Furthermore, the Common Core project was not designed by teachers. Stan Karp (2013) explains:

...The Common Core project was ostensibly designed as a state effort led by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, a private consulting firm. The Gates Foundation provided more than \$160 million in funding, without which Common Core would not exist. The standards were drafted largely behind closed doors by academics and assessment “experts,” many with ties to testing companies. *Education Week* blogger and science teacher Anthony Cody found that, of the 25 individuals in the work groups charged with drafting the standards, six were associated with the test makers from the College Board, five with the test publishers at ACT, and four with Achieve. Zero teachers were in the work groups. The feedback groups had 35 participants, almost all of whom were university professors. Cody found one classroom teacher involved in the entire process.... Parents were entirely missing. K-12 educators were mostly brought in after the fact to tweak and endorse the standards--and lend legitimacy to the results. (p. 14)

The principal at the previous school where I taught told me that under Common Core, what was once considered eighth grade reading level would now be considered sixth grade reading level. When I suggested that raising the standards in this way doesn't allow teachers to “meet students where they are,” as we are advised to do in teacher

certification courses, and instead would serve to push struggling readers out of school, he agreed. I wondered aloud, “Well, then, this curriculum is not for students, and it’s not for teachers, either. Who is this curriculum for? Why are we implementing a curriculum that doesn’t serve students?” He looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Money.” I felt sick.

Who benefits from the implementation of the Common Core? Stan Karp (2013) explains that neither teachers nor struggling students will benefit, but rather private, for-profit schools, and wealthy families who can send their children to them. Students and teachers who remain in the public school system will suffer:

The trouble with the Common Core is not primarily what is in these standards or what’s been left out, although that’s certainly at issue. The bigger problem is the role the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are playing in the larger dynamics of current school reform and education politics.... They have become part of a larger political project to remake public education in ways that go well beyond slogans about making sure every student graduates “college and career ready,” however that may be defined this year. We’re talking about implementing new national standards and tests for every school and district in the country in the wake of dramatic changes in the national and state context for education reform. These changes include....

- The adoption of test-based teacher evaluation frameworks in dozens of states, largely as a result of federal mandates.
- Multiple rounds of budget cuts and layoffs that have left 34 of the 50 states providing less funding for education than they did five years ago, and the elimination of more than 300,000 teaching positions.
- A wave of privatization that has increased the number of publicly funded but privately run charter schools by 50 percent, while nearly 4,000 public schools have been closed in the same period.
- An appalling increase in the inequality and child poverty surrounding our schools, categories in which the United States leads the world and that tells us far more about the source of our educational problems than the uneven quality of state curriculum standards....
- A massively well-financed campaign of billionaires and politically powerful advocacy organizations that seeks to replace our current system

of public education-which, for all its many flaws, is probably the most democratic institution we have and one that has done far more to address inequality, offer hope, and provide opportunity than the country's financial, economic, political, and media institutions-with a market-based, non-unionized, privately managed system. (p. 10)

To return to Baltadano's (2012) description of neoliberalism, Karp (2013) describes how billionaires and the politically powerful have transformed our public education into an unfunded, untested experiment that we are performing on children who attend public school. The government has gotten involved in education in a way that stifles teachers, and actually prevents them from using what has been identified as "best practices," because teachers can no longer even attempt to reach students where they are, but rather must push them into reading that may well be above their ability. Additionally, with the implementation of test-based teacher evaluation, teachers feel increasing pressure to "teach to the test," meaning that rather than focusing on instilling students with a passion for the content of her class, a teacher must focus classroom time on the limited scope of information that will be tested as well as test-taking skills. Furthermore, schools are being held accountable to ever higher expectations, but are provided with fewer resources.

What appears to be laissez faire capitalism, in terms of education, reveals itself to be a system of politically powerful people recreating education in a way that undermines teachers, students, and education itself. Parents of school-aged children are advised that they have a choice regarding where to send their children, and schools must compete with one another to entice parents, but the game is rigged. Public schools accept all children, regardless of socio-economic class, first language, race, or ability. In contrast, private

and charter schools can deny admittance, and/or they can kick out students who might not succeed. By allowing vouchers, private and charter schools have an unfair advantage in the competition for students. Rather than supporting all schools, and allowing all schools the opportunity to experiment with creating the best learning environment possible, the voucher system is like giving subsidies to large oil companies while forcing solar power companies to “let the market decide,” despite less funding, less publicity and accessibility, and less social support and awareness. How can the market make a fair decision in such a situation?

Article I, section 15 of The North Carolina State Constitution, revised in 1971, states: “The people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right.” However, Baltadano (2012) reveals how neoliberalism changes the role of government from one of supporting citizens, and this includes supporting the rights of citizens to the privilege of education, to that of supporting the market. She argues:

Under neoliberalism the state acquires a new identity. It becomes the protector of capital and its role is reduced to the enactment of monetary, fiscal, social, and educational policies to nourish and protect the market. The legitimacy of the state is based on its ability to be true to this function (Brown 2003, 10). (p. 493)

The role of the state under neoliberalism is to protect the market, and one way the state does this is by ensuring that educational policies, among others, support a capitalist system. The hidden curriculum, as I’ve addressed before, ensures that young people learn that the “right” behavior will earn them prizes, and similarly, the “right” answers earn them high scores on the standardized exams. “Wrong” becomes equated with bad,

and bad means no “Cowboy coupons,” or other school currency, and “wrong” further can mean that the student is removed from certain untested courses so that they can attend special tutoring sessions aimed at improving their test scores in the courses where content is tested. Students learn that the primary value of school is to get good test scores.

The role of the state in education is to ensure Common Core’s “success,” but, again, at what cost, and to whose benefit? Karp (2013) explains:

Having financed the creation of the standards, the Gates Foundation has entered into a partnership with Pearson to produce a full set of K-12 courses aligned with the Common Core that will be marketed to schools across the country.... The curriculum and assessments our schools and students need will not emerge from this process. Instead, the top-down, bureaucratic rollout of the Common Core has put schools in the middle of a multilayered political struggle over who will control education policy -- corporate power and private wealth or public institutions managed, however imperfectly, by citizens in a democratic process. (pp. 15-16)

States become responsible for ensuring that public schools are successful at implementing a curriculum created and paid for primarily by the Gates family. Karp further explains that even though the Common Core standards have value, “there is no credible defense to be made of the high-stakes uses planned for these new tests. Instead, the Common Core project threatens to reproduce the narrative of public school failure...” (p. 16). School reform seems to follow a cycle: create a sense of failure in the public schools, implement a new curriculum that takes more decision-making authority away from teachers, praise the new higher standards, examine the data of new test scores, blame teachers for the poor scores, and then implement a new curriculum, further “teacher-proofing” the classroom through increased standardization. This process serves

to support educational and testing corporations, and it supports the status quo by offering more of the same type of education, while hurting children who are not successful at standardized exams and their teachers who have little say in the curriculum they must teach, and who are held accountable to unrealistic expectations of the curriculum-creators and decision-makers who are not in classrooms.

Baltadano (2012) further explains how neoliberalism has changed the focus of the state from its commitment to citizens to a commitment to profitability. She explains: “Under neoliberalism government practices are reduced to the same calculating equations of profitability and cost-efficiency benefits. Gone are the commitments to equality and social justice grounded on the traditional liberalism of the founding fathers” (p. 493). In other words, rather than focusing on how to best prepare students for the future, rather than striving to ensure that all students are prepared to be participating members of a democracy, under neoliberalism, schools serve the needs of corporations. Schools implement curricula and policy that are created by people who are not educators, the testing used to ensure that the new curriculum is effective “proves” that teachers continue to fail to adequately educate their charges, and also “proves” that students need yet a different curriculum. Ravitch (2010) describes education reform as corporate reform, and explains how business, or at least a business ideology, intrudes in the process:

I call it the corporate reform movement not because everyone who supports it is interested in profit but because its ideas derive from business concepts about competition and targets, rewards and punishments, and “return on investment.” In contrast, educators talk about curriculum and instruction, child development, pedagogy, conditions of learning (such as class size), resources, conditions of students’ lives that affect their health and motivation, and relations with families and communities. To many leaders of the reform movement, such issues are

either trivial or distractions. They insist that every child can learn (which is true, even though children learn at different rates and in different ways) and that anything less than a goal of 100 percent proficiency signifies someone making excuses for bad teachers. (p. 251)

Teachers want their students to be successful, but they know from direct experience that expecting all students to be successful on standardized exams is not realistic. Teachers know that poverty, challenges at home, and learning differences impact students' success, and while teachers know that all students can learn, we also know that all students learn at different rates and in different ways. Standardizing education and measuring success by test scores do not reflect a real picture of what happens in a classroom, and relying so heavily on fantastical expectations hurts teachers and children's ability to truly experience genuine success in learning.

Teachers are now required to pour over students' test responses in order to determine what specific skills students may be lacking, based on their wrong answers on multiple choice tests. Teachers are then supposed to focus instruction on those precise skills, usually by providing students with more practice in answering questions that measure each particular skill. Furthermore, teachers are evaluated on the results of their students' test scores. Unfortunately, these tests cannot measure a student's creativity, innovation, compassion, curiosity, or many other qualities that a teacher strives to instill in her pupils, so all that she offers in her classroom, all of what she teaches, including who she is and how she lives her life, is reduced to a measurement of students' responses on multiple-choice exams.

Furthermore, schools that are ineffective at churning out successful test takers can be closed by the state, or taken over by the state, or a state-selected organization, corporation, or team of “experts.” In Chicago and Philadelphia, government leaders are closing public schools at breakneck speed, and the closings are most often in communities of color (Lee, 2013). Closing community schools in favor of consolidating public schools with the remaining children shows an utter disregard for all the people who are impacted, but especially for the children who are forced to walk through dangerous neighborhoods or ride extremely long bus routes simply in order to get an underfunded public education in overcrowded classrooms with overwhelmed teachers (Lee, 2013). Such practices hurt children who remain in public school, and reflect that those who remain in public schools in such a system will be left behind. Not all children deserve an equal chance, according to neoliberalist policy which focuses more on ideology than on reality.

An additional problem with the infusion of neoliberalist thinking into education is the idea that individuals are responsible for every aspect of their lives without taking into consideration the context of their lives, the reality of our national history and culture, especially in terms of race and socioeconomic status, and the impact that our society and laws have on individuals, depending on their privilege and power, or lack thereof. Baltadano (2012) explains that neoliberalism carries with it the message that success and failure depend only on the individual:

Under neoliberalism the individual citizen becomes one of the most important targets. This is not related to the individualism of Adam Smith but it is a redefinition of the role of citizens as “entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of

life” (Brown 2003, 15). In this form of governmentality, individuals become rational subjects whose goal in life is to be self-sufficient. They blame themselves for their own failures regardless of the structural constraints they may face. “A ‘mismanaged life’ becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency” (Brown 2003, 15). Nevertheless, the neo-liberal citizen defines herself as having the power of freedom, represented in the many choices that the free market offers. (p. 493)

What makes neoliberalism dangerous in terms of schooling is this attitude that the individual is completely and solely responsible for his choices, his successes, and his failures. If administrators can ensure that all teachers in the school building are successful in raising the test scores for the majority of students, then clearly the student who fails has only himself to blame. In reality, such thinking does not consider the complexity of the experiences of both the child and the teacher, and reveals a deeply troubling view of the purpose of education as a place to determine one’s worthiness.

Furthermore, one lesson that students learn from neoliberalist thinking is that they deserve the treatment they get. For the most part, participants in my study did not question the way they are treated at Last Chance High because they feel that they did something bad and deserve to be punished. Even the students who felt that they were unfairly assigned to Last Chance accepted the tight security measures as necessary because they assumed that other students were dangerous. When I asked John to talk about the metal detectors and the high security measures that are taken at Last Chance High, he responded:

I don’t mind, really. Some people might think it’s too much or too far, but I mean, everyone’s in here for something, a lot of it involving metal objects. It’s

probably necessary for this place but in an average school or something it wouldn't really be necessary to do all of what they're doing here.

In my study, only John and one other participant mentioned being assigned to Last Chance because of weapons, and the weapon that landed John there was one he made out of wood, by hand, and inspired by a video game. The other participant who was assigned to the school because of a weapon explained that he was wearing his brother's pants, and while there was a knife in one of the pockets, he was unaware of its presence until he got to school. As soon as he discovered the knife, he told me (and his mother later repeated in a court hearing), he threw it in the trash, but he got assigned to Last Chance, regardless. While the participants whom I spoke with were most frequently sent to Last Chance for fighting, the fighting did not include weapons, except for Simi, who stabbed her boyfriend with a pencil. Regardless, John felt that students at Last Chance deserved the high security measures that they experienced. Rather than considering the real reasons that students were assigned there, assuming participants were being honest with me, John got the message that they were a dangerous bunch who required high security measures. They deserved to lose some of the freedoms that they had experienced in the public school, because they were perceived to be, as Joaquin described, "a bunch of criminals here." LeLe, in contrast, resented the security measures, and when I asked her about the hardest part of school, she responded, "Having to get searched every morning." I asked her how that felt, and she elaborated:

Weird. 'Cause you have to shake out your bra, you have to take your shoes off, and everything. It's like, really, and then they put their hands right here, in between your pants and your skin, and go around. I'm like, all that's not

necessary, just so they can see if we have a phone or something. Like, I done seen people, after we do the search, they sneak their phone in. I've done did that before. So, you're not preventing nothing from happening by the search at all.... They never find anything. Cause either way it can get sneaked in anyway.

LeLe explained that the security measures are not necessary or effective, and she resents the security measures taken. They are intrusive, and reveal an additional instance where she must submit authority, but in this situation, the authority to which she submits encroaches on her control over who touches her body. The security practices at Last Chance teach LeLe and the other students that they are not to be trusted, and that they do not belong among the general population of students in public schools.

Neoliberalism in the context of public education ignores historical inequities as well as current societal inequities. When students enroll in school, the attitudes and experiences of their families and communities impact their own attitude towards education, even if the influence of their loved ones is not explicit. So, for example, students with families or communities who have a history of mistrust of the educational system may find themselves maligned, degraded, and disrespected in school, and this could be based on a multitude of factors, such as appearance, grades, the way they present themselves, how loudly they speak, or any number of qualities that have nothing to do with education, other than the lesson of the hidden curriculum, which teaches some students that they do not belong. They or their families may not share the values and cultural ways of being that are expected in school culture. They may have responsibilities at home that trump the expectations of teachers, and all of these mismatches can impact a student's success. Furthermore, no teacher can force a student

to care about a given topic or test results, and holding both student and teacher responsible for success on an endeavor that neither has much power over or input into is simply unreasonable, unfair, and unrealistic.

Children who stay at public school get what their parents pay for, reflecting Baltodano's point that neoliberal citizens' primary role is "entrepreneurial," and policy-makers will argue that it was their choice to stay; otherwise they would have moved to another school. In reality, the answer is never that simple. Choosing another school is not always feasible. As addressed earlier, vouchers do not cover the total costs of private or charter schools, and transportation, dangerous neighborhoods, and private or charter school practices can all limit some students from choosing freely among the range of options that are available to those families with more resources. Baltodano's (2012) final point about citizenship in neoliberalist thinking explains that people's primary concern is to consume according to their abilities. "Let the market decide," goes the common refrain. If a citizen makes a bad decision, he blames himself for his own failures regardless of structural constraints (Baltodano, p. 493), and the lack of real opportunity. However, education is not the same as business, and students are not customers. Our responsibility as adults is to ensure that all children receive equitable education, not just children whose parents have the resources, time, and knowledge to make the best choice.

### **Philosophy of a Progressive Alternative School**

My philosophy regarding education has evolved with time and experience. Initially, I based my teaching philosophy on my own public school education. Soon, however, I began to see that what worked for me when I was a student was not working

for my students, and threats, bribes, and more of the same didn't make any substantial difference. Through my own coursework, reading, interviews, and my own experiences, my philosophy about education has transformed. Inspired by Dewey, Freire, Horton, and Cammorota and Fine, I see the importance of empowering students to participate in actively creating the democratic society that they hope to inhabit as adults. Inspired by the history and current practices of democratic education, as well as Valenzuelas's (1999) research about the role of caring in education, I have envisioned principal elements that I feel are essential for an education to fulfill its purpose of preparing students for their future. These elements include: authentic education, democratic education, multicultural education, social justice, and spirituality.

### **Authentic Education**

Fred Neumann, Helen Marks, and Adam Gamoran (1996) explain that authentic learning is comprised of three primary components: "construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school" (p. 282). They believe that learning occurs best as a constructivist practice, with students constructing learning through interactions and dialogues that connect to what they already know (p. 285). When public education falls under the control of federal mandates and standardized curriculum and assessments, authenticity in the classroom is denied. Teachers are prohibited from determining "where students are," in terms of their prior learning and their current interests, and rather, are obliged to start with the curriculum created by bureaucrats outside the classroom. There can be no authenticity if teachers have little authority to make decisions in their classes. John Ambrosio (2013) explains:

The new orthodoxy in accountability not only offers false promises of school improvement and increased academic achievement, but violates the fundamental right of students to an authentic and meaningful education, and as such, deprives them of the freedom to choose their own existence. To defend public education, and the rights of students, we must begin the long and arduous task of reconstituting the discourse of accountability, and ourselves, while engaging in political struggles to realize a new regime of truth in education. (p. 330)

When educators are primarily accountable to outside interests, then inside interests, the students, have little to say about their education. Presumably, adults know best what children need to know in order to be successful in a world created by adults.

Unfortunately, by holding educators accountable only through the measurement of test scores, the entire purpose of education is diminished. Is the primary role of education to ensure good test-taking skills? Or, given the benefit of the doubt, is the primary role of education to ensure that all students know the facts that they need to know in order to understand the world around them with all the “correct answers”? Regardless, by denying children any opportunity to make meaningful decisions about their education, not only are adults “depriving them of the freedom to choose their own existence,” (Ambrosio, p. 330), but the education provided to children reveals that adults really do not care about the children as individuals with unique interests, needs, learning styles, and abilities. Educators are not accountable to the children in their classroom in such a situation. Rather, they are accountable to administrators, to those who make decisions about education, such as politicians and bureaucrats, and to the public who has been sold a bill of goods regarding the profound value of education. Once the politicians and bureaucrats make decisions about curriculum and assessment, administrators are expected

to enforce the decisions in the schools under their control, and the school administrators are held accountable for the success of the school in meeting the expectations created by others. My experience has been that school administrators then pass down those expectations to the teachers in their school, and the teachers are held accountable for the students' success (or failure) in meeting those expectations, rather than the expectations and needs of the students themselves.

Authentic education instead requires educators and students to engage in honest, open dialogue, to collaborate, and to make decisions through consensus building.

William Ayers (2004) describes authentic learning as part and parcel of democratic education:

Democratic education is characterized fundamentally by dialogue -- the principal vehicle for discussion, deliberation, reconsideration, and transformation. In every dialogue there exists the possibility of mistakes and misperceptions, struggle and emotion, and also of growth and change. This is because authentic dialogue is an unrehearsed act of thinking out loud, and it is based on a recognition that thinking is in large part a social activity, impossible to achieve without the stimulation of other minds.... Dialogue ignites our imaginations and pushes us further along. Dialogue also creates community, even if the community formed is sometimes filled with contention and conflict..... Our goal is... to transform and to be transformed. Our commitment is to question, engage, explore, pay attention, and to look more deeply, again and again. Through dialogue we discover the possibility of renaming, of achieving something new.... One finds a place in the world as a member of the community..... Dialogue is a democratic impulse, a participatory gesture based on faith in the capacity of each person; it is a responsive recognition of the claims of others, as well as a recognition of one's own incompleteness. (pp. 96-97)

Because dialogue cannot be assessed, measured, and used to determine teacher effectiveness, neoliberal policies that favor measurable outcomes override the intrinsic value and learning that occurs through dialogue. Teachers and bureaucrats cannot control

what students will say, and they cannot quantify what students learn as a result of dialogue. In a class based on discussions of ideas, the teacher cannot write on the board “Students will be able to ...” which is a standard expectation of teachers in most public schools in Piedmont County Schools. Additionally, while the teacher is expected to post an “Essential question” on the board, in authentic dialogue, no one can predict if the essential question that the teacher or curriculum creators determined is, in fact, the question that students find essential to answer. In other words, with no input from students, and no room for the possibility of students making decisions about their own education, with a pre-determined curriculum created by outside experts, the public school cannot claim to provide authentic learning experiences for children.

In my vision of a school that would inspire students to create their future as active citizens in a democratic society, authentic learning must be a major component. In order to prepare the groundwork for authentic learning, the primary responsibility for adults at such a school will be to care about children in a real and personal way because authentic learning cannot happen in the absence of authentic, caring relationships. Young people need to feel safe to make mistakes, and they need to know that their worth is not based on their knowledge, test-taking ability, understanding, or even obedience, but rather, young people will learn to accept others, and work collaboratively and cooperatively with others when they feel safe to be themselves, and to explore and experiment with what that means, including mistakes they may make along the way. Angela Valenzuela (1999) cites Nel Noddings’ research about caring:

Noddings (1984, 1992) argues that teachers' ultimate goal of apprehending their students' subjective reality is best achieved through engrossment in their students' welfare and emotional displacement. That is, authentically caring teachers are seized by their students and energy flows toward their projects and needs. The benefit of such profound relatedness for the student is the development of a sense of competence and mastery over worldly tasks. In the absence of such connectedness, students are not only reduced to the level of objects, they may also be diverted from learning the skills necessary for mastering their academic and social environment. Thus, the difference in the way students and teachers perceive school-based relationships can bear directly on students' potential to achieve. (pp 61-62)

Thus, Valenzuela (and Noddings) argue that authentic learning cannot occur without authentic caring. Teachers must engage with their students, learn about them, from them, and with them, in order to work together to create learning opportunities that are truly authentic for the students. Without this caring, Valenzuela explains, students feel themselves to be, and from the teachers' perspective are, objects more than people. Chris, one of the high school participants in my study, explains that in his home school, teachers had too many students to build strong relationship: "Cause in regular high school, it's just a teacher has a class of 30 students. She gets another class of 30 students, so there's no connection; it's just her class of students." He also stated that what made a teacher successful was being able to do just that: "I like a teacher that like knows to – that likes to get to know me and stuff and not just sit there and talk." In my current school, "Encore" teachers – teachers of untested classes like Spanish, art, and life skills – have over 300 students a year. Many of them cannot recognize students' names; they just know faces. In authentic education, students are not the objects of teachers teaching, or objects receiving an education, but rather, participate actively with their teachers to create conditions that inspire them to want to learn.

Once authentic caring relationships are established, then authentic learning can occur. Freire (2006) describes authentic learning as problem-posing education:

Authentic liberation -- the process of humanization -- is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination... in the name of liberation.... Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness --intentionality.... embodies communication. (p. 79)

When teachers and students can recognize one another as valuable, unique individuals, then they cannot so easily relate to one another in a mechanized, dehumanizing way. In public school, educators who care about their charges cannot easily show their caring in ways that are simultaneously genuine and honest in terms of the education they provide because educating in public school requires teachers to see students as test scores, and demands that children participate in an inhumane testing regime precisely so that they can be further measured and dehumanized. Rather than perpetuating this cycle of educational violence, teachers who care about students at a school that provides an authentic education will not focus classrooms on "banking forms of education," where they make deposits into students' brains, hoping they can withdraw the information on multiple choice tests. Instead, teachers will be able to express their caring by listening to students, learning how they think, posing challenges to that thinking, and overall by creating an education that poses problems that are truly relevant to students' lives, in

order that they may study the problem together, working and learning collaboratively to improve understanding.

### **Democratic Education**

In order to truly prepare young people for active participation in a democratic society, adults need to help students understand that democracy means more than voting. Participating in democracy means paying attention, asking questions, considering who benefits from policies and political decisions, and who is hurt by such policies and decisions. Participation requires work, but when citizens are unaware or cannot participate actively, the democracy becomes weaker, and the people's voices are more easily ignored by those in power and those with the most money, power, and privilege. Ann Bastian, Norm Fruchter, Marilyn Gittell, Colin Greer, and Kenneth Haskins explain in Shapiro and Purpel's (1993) *Critical Social Issues in American Education*:

Education for citizenship means that schools should provide children with the social and intellectual skills to function well as members of families and communities, as political participants, as adult learners, as self-directed individuals. Education for citizenship means teaching children about the way the world works and arming them to influence how it works. Citizenship requires basic skills, but it requires other forms of learning as well: critical judgment, social awareness, connection to community, shared values... The bottom line for democratic education is empowerment, not simply employment. Indeed, an attempt to reduce the disjuncture between schooling and job futures will require an empowered citizenry that is prepared to reorder our economic priorities. (p. 83)

Although citizens are traditionally defined as those people who legally reside in a country, perhaps because of my role as a teacher for students who may be here without documentation to legally classify them as citizens, I understand citizens to be people who

live in a country, legally or not. My own grandparents came to the U.S. as refugees, and so I feel sensitive to the implications that the label “citizen” may have. Acknowledging the citizenship of immigrants includes them in some sense, as part of the U.S., as belonging here, and it allows them to make this country their home. Most often, children who were brought to the U.S. for better opportunities stay here as adults, and regardless of their legal status, they work and play in our communities. As their teachers, our responsibility is to prepare them to be contributing citizens of the United States, regardless of their legal status.

If educators truly want to prepare their students with an ability to actively build the communities and societies in which they live, then as adults, we need to teach children honestly about the world they inhabit, and we need to let them practice democracy in the classroom. This means that rather than telling students the expectations, rules, consequences, and content of their learning, as occurs in current practice, teachers need to engage with students in determining the character as well as content of their learning. Michael Apple and James Beane (1995) suggest:

...In a democratic school... all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in the process of decision making. For this reason, democratic schools are marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making. Committees, councils, and other schoolwide decision-making groups include not only professional educators, but also young people, their parents, and other members of the school community. In classrooms, young people and teachers engage in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that respond to the concerns, aspirations, and interests of both. This kind of democratic planning... is... a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. (p. 9)

While public schools provide opportunities for students to run for student government, the decision-making abilities of such bodies are extremely limited. They may determine dates for dances, which still requires administrator approval, and a parting gift to the school upon graduation, but beyond that, student governing is more impactful as an item on a college application than as an empowering experience that allows students authority or power over educational decisions.

Students in traditional public schools have typically no say in determining what they learn or how they learn, and they have no power to make any significant changes that would have a noticeable impact their school. As LeLe explains:

All our classes are really boring, there's no real, like you don't get to choose your classes; they give them to you whether you like it or not. So I feel like they're telling us what we have to do.

Not only was LeLe frustrated by the lack of options regarding classes, but she also expressed irritation about the lack of input into the content of her class. Specifically, she wanted to have some decision-making authority about the books they read in Language Arts class. She added, "We don't get to choose our own books." When I asked her what she'd like to read, she said:

Some books that have, like, something we can relate to as kids.... Like something that we see every day, instead of some old book about the depression [they're reading *Of Mice and Men* in class], and what the teachers call a classic 'cause those are the most boring books ever.

In fact, the lack of choice in reading material became a problem for LeLe, because she noticed that her teacher often chose books that used the N-word. At first, she understood

that the classic American literature they were reading was written in a historical context, but after a few months of reading these classics, she noticed that many of these books used the offensive term.

Like, sometimes when we're in reading and we read certain books, like, the first time I came, I had got why the book said that [the N word]. Like, after awhile, we started noticing that every book we have says it. So it was like, we felt a certain type of way 'cause it was other races saying that word [when students read out loud], where, like if we would have said something about them, and even if we was playing around like he would yell at us, so we decided to say something.

Unfortunately, rather than listening to LeLe's (and her classmates') concern, and discussing it in a way that allowed them to feel that they had some input into the content of the class, the teacher dismissed her complaint, and explained to me privately that LeLe was simply looking for a reason to go home. Later that day, LeLe yelled into that teacher's classroom that he was racist, and sure enough, she was sent home. The teacher described it this way, as copied from my shadowing notes:

He tells me that she's trying to get suspended so she can go home; someone at home enables her. He says she's in a rough situation... He says she suddenly got in a tizzy the previous day because they read something with the N word, and she started going on about the class being racist, even though, he explained, they had read other things with it before, and he always discusses its use before the read it. He thinks she's just looking for a way to get into trouble and go home. He said later in the day when she walked by his room, she yelled into the class that he was racist. He repeated that she just wants to go home, and someone at home enables her.

The fact that he dismisses a real concern that LeLe and other students address, and describes her reaction as her getting in a "tizzy" reveals that these students have no power in this class. In fact, LeLe was forced to apologize to him in the principal's office. The

teacher, on the other hand, did not have to acknowledge the hurt feelings that LeLe and other students felt when they repeatedly heard students read the N word.

A school that encourages student empowerment and decision-making would follow Apple and Beane's (1995) ideas about democratic education in terms of engaging young people to collaborate with their teachers to determine topics for study and ways to approach the topic. Additionally, students and parents, as well as teachers will decide together, ideally through reaching consensus regarding school norms about behavior as well as assessment and hiring new teachers. With a process in place to hold school meetings where adults and children address situations and issues that arise, students will learn to appreciate the responsibilities that come along with participation in a democratic community and society. Alfie Kohn (1999) explains that the best way to teach children to make decisions is to allow them opportunities to make important decisions.

...Students learn most avidly and have their best ideas when they get to choose which questions to explore.... All of us tend to be happiest and most effective when we have some say about what we are doing. If we are instead just told what to do (or, in the case of schooling, deprived of any opportunity to make decisions about what we're learning), achievement tends to drop – right along with any excitement about what we're doing.... The opposite of being controlled is to be able to make decisions, to have one's voice heard.... It is breathtaking to be part of, or even to watch, a classroom where students have some control over what happens, where their questions and concerns help to shape the course of study, where they help to decide what they're doing, and when, and where, and how, and with whom, and why -- as well as how their progress will be assessed when they're done.... Children learn to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Besides, this model represents the ultimate in taking kids seriously, putting them at the center, helping to generate the interest that fuels excellence. (pp. 150-151)

Although allowing students decision-making power can be challenging and demands great patience, ultimately, doing so will help them to learn how to make important decisions in a thoughtful, responsible way. With experience, they can understand the impact of a poorly-made decision, and can then use that failure as an opportunity for growth and further learning. This practice gives young people the power and autonomy they need to grow into thoughtful and creative problem-solvers. They learn not to be afraid of failures, or bad decisions, because they understand that every experience is a learning opportunity.

### **Critical Multicultural Education**

Although multicultural studies is rarely mentioned in conjunction with democratic or progressive schooling, in order to participate most compassionately in a democracy, people need to gain richer, more diverse perspectives from which to view policies, practices, and culture. Banks (2013) explains that multicultural education evolved from ethnic studies, which emerged from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, as “African Americans demanded that their histories, struggles, contributions, and possibilities be reflected in textbooks and in the school curriculum” (p. 74). In its early days, ethnic studies were taught in a superficial and safe way, focusing on a few heroes and interesting holidays.

However, several serious problems resulted from the heroes-and-holiday approach to the integration of ethnic content into the curriculum. Most frequently, ethnic content remained separate and distinct from the mainstream curriculum; consequently, the mainstream curriculum was not challenged or transformed and students were not able to see the ways in which ethnic content was an integral part of the American saga. Another problem with this approach was that the ethnic

heroes chosen for study were frequently safe heroes who did not question or challenge the status quo. (p. 74)

Over time, social justice oriented educators began to recognize that this practice was not sufficient to create an education that truly reflected the diversity of culture and experiences that the students lived. Ethnic studies evolved, Banks explains, to reflect this diversity not in a superficial way, but rather, in a way that aims to mirror the range of cultures, and the experiences of a larger range of citizens of the U.S.

Multicultural education has evolved from ethnic studies, to multiethnic education, to multicultural education, and to multicultural education in a global context. However, it is important to keep in mind that the earlier components of multicultural education did not disappear when the new dimensions were constructed; rather multiethnic education incorporated important aspects of ethnic studies, just as multicultural education incorporates important elements of ethnic studies and multiethnic education. (pp. 79-80)

In an education that prepares young people to be knowledgeable and active citizens, students must learn to examine the world and the decisions they make with an eye towards justice, which means considering the past, present and future with an awareness of privilege and power, and with thought to implications and unintended consequences to various groups of people. In his discussion of difference and privilege, Allan G. Johnson (2001) argues, "...The purpose is to change how we think so that we can change how we act, and by changing how we participate in the world, become part of the complex dynamic through which the world itself will change" (p. viii). In a school that honors the diversity of the community, students will change how they think because they will become more aware of the experiences of those with privilege, and those without

privilege, and they will learn to recognize how the systems that perpetuate privilege reduce the humanity of everyone in those systems. Johnson (2001) explains, “Privilege is always at someone else’s expense and always exacts a cost. Everything that’s done to receive or maintain it – however passive and unconscious – results in suffering and deprivation for someone” (p. 10). With an awareness of privilege and an understanding about how privilege operates in various institutions, young people will be better prepared to contribute, vote, and serve in society in ways that are compassionate and thoughtful, and in ways that will aim to dismantle privilege. They will understand how words and actions may serve to perpetuate the status quo, and they will learn how to take action that undermines privilege and moves towards justice.

Not only does multicultural education aims to make students aware of power and privilege, however, but it also strives to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in public education because of traditional practices and curriculum in public schools. Nieto (2005) explains:

Multicultural education covers a broad range of approaches and definitions (Banks & Banks, 2004). Nevertheless, most proponents agree that it is based on the need to provide all students with a high-quality and equitable education. This is particularly crucial for those students who have been failed by the public schools because of differences such as race/ethnicity, language, immigrant status, social class, and others that are often positioned negatively in society. Besides affirming the identities of all students through a more inclusive curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy, multicultural education also takes into account the sociopolitical context in which education takes place by challenging institutional policies and practices, both in schools and society, that perpetuate inequality. As such, it is part of comprehensive school reform and a project in the larger struggle for social justice (Nieto, 2004). (pp. 56-57)

While multicultural education does not have one explicit way of being practiced or implemented, the purpose of multicultural education is consistent: to create an education that serves all students, and especially students who have traditionally been failed by public education. Students who are not White and middle-class do not learn about their history or values in school, and in order to be successful in public schools, all students must adopt the values promoted in school, regardless of the values that are taught in their homes. Additionally, students of color must learn how to cope with racist statements without much support from teachers who do not recognize or refuse to address racist comments made by White students. Maria explains: “I hear it, like you hear stuff and you like, when they’re tryin’ to beat around the bush and stuff, but they won’t be just like straight up with you and stuff, that’s what happens here.” She explained how a White student “always made like black jokes about people. Always said I sound like a slave.... He said that the other kid, the other white kid was my, um, master.” I asked what the teacher did when he says things like that, and Maria said, “Ignore it most likely.” In our second interview, Maria said that students tease her for her struggles with reading. She said, “...they like to pick on me; they say I’m, Ray Charles taught me how to read... and um Stevie Wonder, them ‘cause you know they’re blind... and he said um I read like a slave and stuff.” From my perspective, these statements clearly reveal that students are making racist comments without fear of any type of negative consequence. Telling a student of color that she is like a slave, and then bringing another (White) student in the discussion as a master show an insensitivity and ignorance about race that is both profound and hurtful. From our interview, I got the sense that Maria might be dyslexic,

although she has not been diagnosed formally as such. Regardless, to say that she reads “like a slave” is a brutal and unfair comment on a skill that she struggles to acquire. Such a statement could devastate a young woman of color if she interprets it as a comment about the ability of members of her race to read successfully. It further puts her in a permanent diminished status regarding her worth as a human being, since slavery could only be implemented by refusing to recognize the humanity of the slaves. For those students whose home culture mirrors the school culture, the transition from home to school is smooth, but for those whose cultures differ, not only do they need to learn the school culture, but they also need to ignore or deny the values and practices that are favored in their home.

Chris Liska Carger (1996) explains that standardized test results reveal inequities in the school system because common practice is for adults, specifically educators, policy-makers, and administrators, to see the children not as unique individuals who bring their own rich cultures into classrooms, but rather, as members of “subgroups” that don’t necessarily share the same values, beliefs, expectations, and experiences as those in power to make decisions about education. Carger explains:

The child... truly is not the problem. The problem... is educational systems which have not adapted successfully to such diversity, which have not looked into the face of such a child and seen beauty and potential, but function instead in a deficit finding mode. Systems that have not accepted varied ways of talking, knowing, doing, and valuing... nor offered a helping hand to cross the borders life presents to such students, that frequently cannot even offer a safe environment in which to attempt to educate such a child. (p. 7)

In order to look into the faces of students and see beauty and potential, teachers have to learn to reject the importance of test scores, but not only do they need to disregard the measurements, teachers must also learn to look outside their own perspectives and belief systems in order to learn about the child's and his family's perspectives and values.

Without knowing the full and rich history of the diverse experiences in the U.S., teachers cannot truly understand the history, experiences, and perspectives of their students, and without understanding, authentic caring, as Valenzuela (1999) addresses, must be somewhat limited and superficial.

Beyond caring, in order to participate in democracy thoughtfully, educators and students need to understand the important contributions and experiences of the various cultures in the U.S. James Banks (1991) explains why this is important in schools:

The multicultural curriculum should also help students to expand their conceptions of what it means to be human, to accept the fact that ethnic minority cultures are functional and valid, and to realize that a culture can be evaluated only within a particular cultural context. Because cultures are made by people, there are many ways of being human. By studying this important generalization, students will hopefully develop an appreciation for the great capacity of human beings to create a diversity of life-styles and to adapt to a variety of social and physical environments. All students also need ethnic content to help them better understand themselves and the world in which they live. The ethnic experience is part of the human experience; education should deal with the total experience of humankind. (p. 27)

By enriching their understanding of "what it means to be human," (Banks, p. 27) teachers can help students learn to be more accepting of people and ideas that they may not initially understand and/or agree with, and instill a sense of humility and appreciation when engaging in challenging dialogues. Teaching multiculturalism is an exercise of

expanding one's sense of what is normal, what is human, and what is acceptable. Multicultural education also aids children in understanding how our society has formed, from a variety of perspectives, both nationally and in communities, and it helps children to recognize the impact of culture and privilege in everyone's lives. As Banks explains, "The ethnic experience is part of the human experience; education should deal with the total experience of humankind" (p. 27). In other words, how one group is treated, how laws affect certain groups more than others ultimately impacts all members of a society. In order to be more reflective, sensitive citizens, all students should learn African American history alongside the history of White leaders. All students should learn how women fought for the right to vote, for example, in order to learn about the long, arduous process of changing culture. Latin Americans' experience in the U.S. is vital to truly understanding the immigration situation we now face, and the history of Latin Americans is clearly part of American history. Similarly, rather than setting aside one month of the year to address African-American history, an education that aims to prepare all students for participation in a thriving democracy would incorporate African-American history as a fundamental component of all of American history. In other words, a course in U.S. American history would include the history of all the people who helped build and shape the country.

James Banks (1995) describes five primary dimensions that critical multicultural education must incorporate. They include: "(a) content integration, (b) the knowledge construction process, (c) prejudice reduction, (d) an equity pedagogy; and an (e) empowering school culture and social structure" (p. 392). Content integration is much as

it sounds: how teachers incorporate “examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline” (p. 392).

Knowledge construction process refers to the methods, questions, and activities that teachers use to teach content (p. 392). Current practice in many public school classrooms in middle and upper grades, for example, is to have students in separate desks, sitting in rows, facing the teacher at the front of the room. Working together is considered cheating, and students are often advised to hide their work or answers from peers. However, not all cultures and families share such a high level of competition; some cultures view working collaboratively as a better practice. Furthermore, the types of questions teachers ask reflect cultural practice as well. Often, public school teachers ask students questions that simply require a correct, short answer, whereas, in her ethnographic study of students in Appalachia, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) discovered that the Black parents asked questions that demanded much different and much more communication. Nieto (2005) describes the difference as follows:

In contrast, in their homes [in the homes of children of color] the children were asked questions about whole events or objects, as well as about their uses, causes, and effects. These questions, which were frequently linguistically complex and required children to have a sophisticated use of language, also required them to make analogical comparisons and understand complex metaphors. Usually there was no one “right” answer, because answers involved telling a story or describing a situation. The result of the different kinds of questions asked in the different contexts was a perplexing lack of communication between students and teachers. (p. 48)

Heath (1983) found that in the homes of the White children, parents more frequently asked children questions that the parents already knew the answer to, similar to teachers' common practice in school, so the White children had an advantage from a young age because their home culture was closely linked to school culture. When home and school communication practices diverge so powerfully, as it did for the children of color in Heath's (1983) study, students and teachers are bound to struggle to communicate clearly with one another, as teacher's expectations vary widely from parents' expectations.

Banks describes the third component, prejudice reduction, as relating to: "the characteristics of students' racial attitudes and strategies that teachers can use to help them develop more democratic values and attitudes" (p. 392). Multicultural education aims to open students' minds to the reality that multiple perspectives exist, and people have different experiences that form their understanding of the world around them. A wide range of perspectives are recognized as valid in a multicultural education, and when students can understand the truth of perspectives that differ from their own, then they can be more open-minded.

Banks' fourth component is an "equity pedagogy," which he describes as occurring "...when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender groups (Banks & Banks, 1995b)" (p. 392). As I mentioned previously, a common refrain that I hear in teacher workrooms goes something like, "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for my students." However, just because a teaching practice is successful with one group of students at a particular time and place, does not mean the same practice will

be successful with all students today, and when a teaching method is not working, as standardized test results indicate, then the teachers have a responsibility to find other methods to ensure all students' success.

The fifth component of multicultural education is “empowering school culture and social structure” (Banks, p. 392). Banks explains:

This dimension conceptualizes the school as a social system that is larger than any of its constituent parts such as the curriculum, teaching materials, and teacher attitudes and perceptions. The systemic view of schools requires that in order to effectively reform schools, the entire system must be restructured, not just some of its parts. (p. 393)

In other words, while teaching methods and classroom content need to be modified in order to guarantee all students' success as best as possible, Banks argues that the entire public school system needs major transformation. He further explains:

The search for quick solutions to problems related to race and ethnicity partially explains some of the practices, often called multicultural education, that violate theory and research. These include marginalizing content about ethnic groups by limiting them to specific days and holidays such as Black History month and Cinco de Mayo. A systemic view of educational reform is essential for the implementation of thoughtful, creative, and meaningful educational reform. (p. 393)

Educators cannot simply plug in units here and there to incorporate lessons about the heroes and holidays of diverse cultures, but rather, educators, administrators, and the school community need to collaborate to determine the practices and curriculum that best reflects the education that should be provided to students. As Christine Sleeter (1996) argues, “Multicultural education literature should be viewed as a tool for collaboration.

This means that it needs to be accessible to a wide community audience, and oppressed communities should decide for themselves what ideas are most useful” (p. 244). There is no quick solution. Democracy is messy business, and teaching in ways that promote democracy and equality require adults working through the mess in order to transform education into a system that supports all children equitably.

### **Social Justice Education**

While democratic schools incorporate authentic learning and multicultural education, social justice action links all components together. In a school that truly prepares students to engage in a democratic society, students would find outlets where they can actually implement what they learn in the classroom into the “real world” of work, and my hope is that the “real world” of work experience will be with an eye towards social justice. Susan Torres-Harding and Steven Meyers (2013) describe social justice education as follows:

A key tenet of social justice education derived from Freire’s model is the importance of developing awareness of oppressive social conditions, termed conscientização, or critical consciousness. Awareness of oppressive conditions (whether affecting oneself or another), are presumed to be necessary and conducive for social action. Multicultural and social justice educators have similarly stressed the importance of self-awareness. This includes knowing one’s own attitudes, beliefs, values, and cultural worldviews, and how one’s power and privilege affect one’s own worldview (Constantine et al., 2007; Goodman, 2001; Goodman et al., 2004; Vera & Speight, 2003). Similarly, as grounded in feminist scholarship, social justice education encourages students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds to express their “voice.” This entails having individuals know and express their lived experiences, perspectives, desires, and beliefs. (pp. 214-215)

Daily, public school students recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which concludes with “liberty and justice for all” (Bellamy, 1892), but students rarely have the opportunity to learn about justice, or act in ways that promote justice. If educators aim to have a positive impact on the future, I think we need to teach with that intention in mind. Curricula, methods, and assessments would be more authentic and improve our experience of democracy if educators taught with an eye to practicing “justice for all.” Carl Grant and Melissa Leigh Gibson (2013) describe social justice education as “education for freedom” (p. 93), and they explain that the aim of social justice education is to empower students to change the world. They explain:

Social justice education is, ultimately, education for freedom, by which the promotion of basic human rights and dignity fosters social change: "Teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world" (Ayers, 1998, p. xvii). By embracing cultural differences and promoting pluralism, by challenging cultural imperialism and unequal hierarchies of power, by interrogating material inequalities and advocating for economic justice, and by equipping students with the skills necessary to be active and responsible democratic citizens, social justice education is working for a world that honors fundamental human rights. Social justice education promotes "the full development of the human personality" (UN, 1948, 226.3), unhindered by systemic human rights violations and social injustices. (pp. 93-94)

Social justice education, they argue, is simultaneously democratic education and multicultural education because social justice education promotes human rights and pluralism. They are inseparable. In order to truly provide a democratic education, teachers must incorporate social justice education as well as multicultural education. Educators cannot aim to provide a democratic education without addressing multicultural

issues or social justice concerns. As Silvia Bettez and Kathy Hytten (2011) explain: “Starting with a vision of democracy that balances individual rights and responsibilities and that is premised upon upholding the common good helps us to see why social justice matters, for without this vision of justice, democratic life is impossible” (p. 20). From my perspective, social justice education, along with an authentic education, requires some form of action. Social justice education means that students must actively engage with their community, either at home or at school, in a way that aims to bring more justice to that community. Students can see and identify the problems that impact themselves and their community, and rather than ignoring challenges, a democratic, authentic, and social justice oriented school can help them to consider actions that may make a positive difference, and then such an education can empower students to take those actions, learn from the action and the impact of their action, and move forward to more effective and thoughtful directions.

Social justice education makes learning simultaneously personal and community-oriented. Students learn about privilege and how it impacts them personally, and they also learn how society provides privilege to some and not to others. Bettez and Hytten (2011) explain that social justice oriented writers, and I would add educators, are “working toward a more idealized vision of democracy as a way of life that aims to disrupt oppression and to empower individuals and communities to create socially just institutions, policies, systems and structures” (p. 21). They further suggest, “Justice oriented citizens look for the root causes of social problems and aim to disrupt privileging systems, rather than celebrating charity and volunteerism as the primary means to social

change” (p. 20). Social justice education aims to dismantle privilege so that all members of a society have an equal opportunity to fulfill their dreams. Providing opportunities to bring classroom learning into action in communities simultaneously empowers students by showing them that they have something valuable to contribute to society and also makes classroom learning authentic because students see how their studies connect to the world outside the classroom.

At a school that intentionally encourages students to actively create a just and equitable future for all people, students will choose areas that reflect their own interests, and with guidance will create plans and work/volunteer opportunities to act thoughtfully towards creating a more just, more democratic, and more caring community. Such activity will help students to see that they have a positive contribution to make in their communities and school, and my hope is that it further inspires them to feel engaged with their education, their communities, one another, and ultimately, with their place in the world.

### **Spirituality/Peace Education**

Although I have found little in literature that connects teaching spirituality explicitly with progressive or democratic education, I feel strongly that in order for education to be authentic, it must touch the spirit of the learner. In order to encourage students to work towards creating a peaceful world, adults need to teach, as best as possible, paths to finding inner peace. However, defining “spirit” or “spirituality” seems nearly impossible. One can say what spirit is not, but explaining what it is like trying to describe a color to someone who has never experienced sight. Defining spirit is like

defining soul, or god. Words cannot explain or describe these terms adequately, and instead serve to diminish their profundity. For clarity's sake, however, when I use the terms "spirit," and "spirituality," I am referring to a sense of awe, and to a profound awareness of one's connection to others, to the Earth, and to the universe. "Spirit" refers to that which makes us able to step outside of our egos, outside of our unique personalities, and brings us into intimate, powerful connection with others that allows us to recognize an ineffable quality that all beings share. Teachers can create experiences that touch students' spirit without imposing any specific faith, and multiple avenues exist to this end. In order to inspire students to work for social justice, teachers must draw upon young people's ability to empathize and connect with others, both requiring an ability to access spiritual feelings that can help us to connect to our sense of compassion.

Matthew Fox (2006) writes:

Compassion is the living out of our interdependence.... Compassion is about sharing the joy and sharing the pain, and about doing what we can to relieve the pain, especially that caused by injustices, whether they be ecological, economic, social, racial, gender, or generational in nature. Compassion requires the calling forth, the educating, the educating, therefore, of our deepest capacities as a species – our capacity to act as if we truly are part and parcel of one another, in joy as well as in sorrow. Compassion calls us to create a society where all are winners and none are losers... (p. 122)

Educating our children to be compassionate will help them to make decisions using both heart and head, and decisions made this way are more likely to be of benefit to those who are impacted by the decision. Educating for and with compassion, Fox suggests, will help children grow up to be adults who create a society without privilege, where all humans have an equal chance of living a fulfilling, joyful, and creative life.

Similarly, H. Svi Shapiro (2006) discusses the need for touching students' spirits by inspiring a profound sense of hope in students. Teachers can inspire hope by looking deeply into history and current events:

...Hope requires a reaching into the spiritual roots of the human condition, connecting to the timeless and mysterious impulses that seem to be present in all the great faiths of humanity, reminding us of the abiding need for justice, for love, and for peace. Educating for hope... is best achieved when we can blend all these: school as a place that attempts to connect the young to the passions and struggles of past generation[s], where learning is not just about books but actually engaging in communal healing and improvement, and education is a process of human development that reaches both into our intellects and also into our spirits. (p. 43)

When education is based on facts and test scores, no thought is given to the role of hope or the need for justice, love, and peace. What does justice have to do with algebra?

What is the role of peace in studying atoms? On the other hand, if teachers had the power, desire, and time to consider such questions and make such connections, lesson plans might have the impact of touching students' spirits. For example, in the documentary *Precious Knowledge* (Palos, 2011), educator Jose Gonzalez poses math problems to students in a way that connects to their lives outside of school. He says that Mexican Americans make up a certain percentage of the population. Considering that percent, he asks students to predict what percent of Mexican Americans are incarcerated. Not only is the manner of such teaching relevant to students, it simultaneously addresses issues of social justice and touches the spirit of his students by presenting the content in a way that shows compassion, understanding, and empathy. He does not blame individuals for breaking the law, but rather explains the situation of incarceration to students in a way that allows them to be aware that the situation is more complicated than meets the eye.

He helps them recognize that there is “bias in the system,” which leads to disproportionate incarceration rates.

Although current educational practice avoids delving into spirit-related learning, Fox (2006) suggests that educators would be wise to do just that:

A Native American elder has said, “Only a madman thinks with his head.” I might add, only a mad civilization thinks with its head... or educates people to think only with their heads. A healthy individual and a healthy educational system learn to think with heart as well as with head. Such a civilization thinks wisely. (p. 102)

If educators hope to have a profound impact on their students’ lives as well as their learning, then they must be willing to touch students’ spirits. When children (and adults) consider challenges from an intellectual and spiritual perspective, and with a profound sense of hope, knowing that generations before them shared in similar struggles and moved forward, then the decisions they make will be with an eye towards making the future more just, and more peaceful.

### **Starting with the End**

Many books, articles, professional development courses, as well as certification courses recommend teachers create their plans with the end in mind. What do we want our students to learn? What do we want them to remember? Teachers are also reminded that children learn as much, if not more, from who their teachers are, from how their teachers live, from what they reveal about their values, than they learn from the content of the classroom. When students ask why I became a teacher, I explain that teachers can change the world. When a teacher impacts a student’s life, not only is the student

impacted, for better or for worse, but everyone in the student's life is affected as well. In the course of a lifetime, or even just a year, a teacher indirectly may impact hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. Over the course of a career, her influence can be profound.

Although I know that the advice for teachers to start with the end is made in reference more to content than to character, I feel strongly that since the content learned in school is so often forgotten, considering character reflects my belief that who you are is more important than what you know. Intelligence is a gift; learning easily in school is a combination of factors including luck, socio-economic status, familiarity with the culture, values, and expectations of the school, and hard work, and while I love learning and hope to instill my love of learning in students, more important to me is that students learn to cherish peace, love, and community. At the same time, I am aware that I am an imperfect teacher: I am impatient, fearful, and can easily dismiss the humanity of the children before me in my drive to "cover content." Recognizing this, however, reminds me that learning is a process; I am not finished. I expect that I won't be finished until I'm no longer breathing. My hope is that school will be a place where administrators and teachers can cherish learning with colleagues, students, and community, and where we can practice values that will plant seeds for a better future.

CHAPTER V  
CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES: TRUE ALTERNATIVES AND ALTERNATIVES  
IN NAME ONLY

When I began my research for this project, I hoped to find an alternative high school that inspired and engaged students. I wanted to see what alternatives already exist so that I could learn about the diverse options educators are already providing to youth who may not succeed or who simply may not fit in at public schools. In seeking out such a school, however, the options that I found in the nearby vicinity were not truly alternative, from my perspective. Although students have a variety of alternative schools to choose from, these options do not provide a unique, engaging curriculum, nor do they allow much in terms of student voice or choice. I found no schools that address democratic education or spirit-learning for high school students. One school that I found seemed to implement multicultural learning, but when I asked the director of the school about the possibility of my doing research there, he explained that he would have to speak with the board of directors, and then get back to me. Unfortunately, he did not get back to me, and he didn't return my calls or messages after our initial contact. Although Waldorf and Montessori schools exist in the area, they end at eighth grade, and those students then generally attend public schools.

In this chapter, I look at alternative schools in order to learn from what already exists. I compare Last Chance High, where I conducted my qualitative research, with

similar alternatives offered to students whose needs are not being met in public school, and I show that these alternatives do not offer a substantially different education, but rather, serve to coerce and/or bribe students with increasing severity in order to offer, quite literally, one last chance before dropping out of school completely. Then I explore some alternatives that, while they may even include some public schools, do incorporate genuine possibilities for students to experience education in a way that empowers and inspires them. I look specifically at examples of schools that offer students an authentic, democratic, multicultural, and social-justice oriented education, and I further explore examples of courses or programs that implement elements of spirit-learning.

### **Alternatives in Name Only**

What I found in the literature generally supports my experience that the alternatives offered to students who are unsuccessful in public high school do not provide an authentic alternative. Carol P. McNulty and Donyell L. Roseboro (2009) describe alternative schools as follows:

Ranging from less than optimal educational experiences to "warehouses" for students (Dunbar, 1999, p. 241) and "junior jails" (Cobb et al., 1997, p. 1), few alternative schools have entered the national scene by evidencing truly alternative means of education.... Alternative schools have been portrayed by what Slater (2006) first labeled the "toilet assumption," (p. 19) in that society and schools tend to "flush out" problems from the mainstream to remove them from immediate consciousness. (p. 413)

Last Chance High, the school where I conducted my research, fit this description aptly. Students are assigned to Last Chance High after they have been expelled or long-term suspended from public school, and they stay at Last Chance High as long as the court and

school administration decide. Depending on the severity of the action that got them into trouble in the first place, students may enroll at Last Chance from nine weeks up to one year.

The three primary differences between Last Chance High and the traditional public schools are class size, lunch, and the surveillance which I will discuss further in the next section. Although the number of students in classes varies throughout the school year at Last Chance, as students can be assigned to enroll at any time of the school year, and students transition back to their home schools throughout the year as well, in general, class size at the alternative is smaller than in most public school classrooms. When I shadowed participants in April 2013, most classes had seven to ten students. Finally, while students were served similar lunches as those in the public schools, since there was no actual kitchen on the premises, the lunches for sale in the makeshift cafeteria consisted of reheated leftovers that had been prepared and sold the day before for lunch at one of the nearby public schools.

### **Heightened Security**

At schools that serve as a last chance before students are expelled from public schools, the primary focus seems not so much about providing an academic education as it is on teaching students who is in power, and how to submit appropriately to that power.

Pedro Nogueira (2003) explains:

Although it is almost never stated as official policy, school officials are generally aware that students on an educational path that leads to nowhere will cause more trouble, and will therefore have to be subjected to more extreme forms of control. This is especially true for schools that serve disproportionate numbers of academically unsuccessful students (e.g., alternative schools for students with

behavior problems, some vocational schools, and many inner-city high schools). Such schools often operate more like prisons than schools. They are more likely to rely on guards, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras to monitor and control students, restrict access to bathrooms, and attempt to regiment behavior by adopting an assortment of rules and restrictions.... In any educational setting where ... the adults view large numbers of them [students] as potentially bad or even dangerous, the fixation on control tends to override all other educational objectives and concerns. (p. 345)

Such schools use behaviorist techniques, implementing rewards and punishments, or in common educational jargon, incentives and consequences, to focus students' attention on the impact of their behavior on themselves. They learn that if they want to return to their home school, they cannot punch another student in the face, for example. They don't learn, however, that they shouldn't punch another because doing so harms the other student who deserves to learn in a safe environment. Students do not learn to behave well out of a sense of ethical or morality, but instead because behaving badly will cause more suffering to themselves. Furthermore, for students who have been sent to an alternative school as a last chance, they learn to believe the neoliberalist philosophy that they deserve their poor treatment because they alone are responsible for their situations and actions.

Unlike every other public school in Piedmont County where I have taught, when students come into Last Chance High, they immediately must go through security. Usually five to six adults stand by a metal detector, all with specific duties. One teacher goes through students' bags, books, and other loose belongings, and confiscates any unacceptable items. During one interview, a participant told me that some of his drawings had been confiscated, though he couldn't understand why. One day, when I

was shadowing a participant, I witnessed the confiscation, and further disruption that ensued, of a young woman's cell phone. My notes read:

Two girls come in talking loudly. They are shushed. One girl is told to put her cellphone in the coat room. She raises her voice. "I ain't puttin' that over there; it's expensive. Last time I put something over there, it got stolen." A teacher tells her to call her mom to come get it. She says, "My momma not coming from Asheboro to get it. She's at work."

Another teacher guides students through the metal detector. A third teacher waves a wand over students like what one might see in airport security. A fourth teacher watches while students remove shoes and shake them upside down to ensure that nothing is hidden inside. A woman stands by and takes any female students to a bathroom or her office, where they go through the procedure privately.

Also, although students in public school must ask for permission to get water or use bathrooms, they can transport themselves alone, but at Last Chance High, students were not allowed to leave the classroom unescorted at any time, for any reason. Teachers had walkie-talkies; if a student needed to use the bathroom, the teacher would call for an escort. There were two people, one man, and one woman, whose jobs, it seemed to me, consisted of conducting the security screening upon entering the school and escorting students throughout the day. Students had no lockers, but had to store any unauthorized belongings in a general coat room which remained locked. However, it would be easy for a student to take another student's possession because if he asked for, and was granted permission to go to the coat room for an early dismissal, for example, he had access to all students' belongings. If the person escorting the students wasn't watching carefully, or

didn't know which items belonged to which student, someone could easily grab a phone that belonged to another.

When I first toured Last Chance High, I noticed that all classrooms had large windows which separated classes from hallways. This allowed the light from the hallways to the outdoors to come into the classrooms. I commented to the principal how nice it was that students had more access to natural light this way. The principal explained that the intention was not to allow for natural light, as I naïvely supposed, but rather, so that students knew that they were always under scrutiny. Any time he or another adult walked by any classroom, students knew that they were on display, able to be scrutinized at all times. Giroux (2009) explains:

More and more working-class and middle-class youth and poor youth of color either find themselves in a world with vastly diminishing opportunities or are fed into an ever-expanding system of disciplinary control that dehumanizes and criminalizes their behavior in multiple sites, extending from the home and school to the criminal justice system - not, of, course, fed in order to be "absorbed" and "incorporated" into the system, but rather fed and vomited up, thus securing the permanence of their exclusion. (p. 72)

Last Chance High and similar alternatives aim to scare students into behaving in more socially sanctioned ways. Security and surveillance practices that are frequently part of alternative school settings teach the young people who are sent to such schools that if they don't "straighten up," then they will face more surveillance and less freedom than they do in school. If they can't fit in at school, then they will be excluded by being sent to an alternative school. If they continue on their paths of resistance, schools like Last

Chance teach them that eventually they will be excluded from society by being sent to prison.

### **Identical Curriculum**

Christopher Dunbar, Jr. (2001) argues that alternative schools serving students who have been unsuccessful in public school should not mirror public school, or jail, but rather, should offer something different:

An alternative school should be an alternative to that which is traditionally offered in public school. This may consist of a different curriculum, a different pedagogical approach, a smaller student-teacher ratio, one-on-one teaching, student-centered education, problem-posing, the philosophy that the student becomes the teacher and the teacher becomes the student -- all of the things we write and profess but seldom incorporate in our own practice.... Alternative schools should not simply mirror traditional public schools. It didn't work for these children the first time. Something different must occur in the alternative school. This begins by getting to know your students. (p. 122)

As much as I agree with Dunbar's assessment of what an alternative school should be, in reality, unfortunately, Last Chance High appears to be a warehouse of sorts, offering students a chance to graduate if they can change their behavior enough to get through their assigned term at the alternative and then return to their home school "reformed." The curriculum at Last Chance High is the same as that of the Piedmont County Schools, which allows the students who are assigned there to gain credits towards graduation. In fact, not only is the curriculum the same, some of the assignments are the same. Simi told me that she recognized a worksheet that her language arts teacher gave her as identical to one she had completed in class at her home school. The pedagogical approach is also the same as what's found in most public school classrooms: desks are

arranged in rows, facing the teacher in the front of the room, teachers post the “Essential Question” (the question students should be able to answer by the end of the class period or unit) as well as “Word Walls,” (a list of vocabulary words) on the board. These practices are expectations for all teachers in Piedmont County, and since Last Chance High is part of Piedmont County Schools, teachers follow the same expectations as those in the traditional schools. Similar to practice in the more traditional public schools, the math teacher had students work out problems on worksheets, and then they reviewed the problems on the board. The language arts teacher had students respond to a writing prompt, after which they read *Of Mice and Men* out loud, in a round-robin style, interrupted regularly to check for comprehension, relate to the story, explore character development, etc. Students in many 11<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms throughout the county read the same book, and also use the same practices to ensure comprehension. Students are required to take the same standardized end-of-year exams that are given in home schools. The similarities help students transition back to their home schools smoothly with easy transferability of grades, class credits, and general culture. The transition from home school to alternative and back is relatively simple, since they are so similar.

Last Chance is typical in the way it aligns curriculum with the more traditional public schools. Camilla A. Lehr, Chee Soon Tan and Jim Ysseldyke (2009) examine alternative schools across the U.S., and find that most alternative schools follow the same practice.

Many states have policy stating that curriculum should consist of “Core Curriculum Content Standards” or standards adopted by the state. Many states had language that indicated students must complete state graduation requirements.

Data collected from the state-level survey also suggests students attending alternative schools work toward a set of common state standards. Furthermore, 15 survey respondents (47%) indicated that the state standards and curriculum are well integrated, similar to traditional schools; and 14 respondents (44%) reported that the incorporation of state standards and curriculum is emerging (programs are working on it;  $n = 32$  states reporting). (p. 28)

Part of the appeal of alternative school for some of the participants in my research was the fact that the curriculum was so closely aligned with public school requirements for graduation. This allowed them to return to their home school as soon as their assigned time at Last Chance was complete, without having lost credits or wasted time on courses that “wouldn’t count” towards graduation. One participant, Chris, even explained that he intended to return to Last Chance the following Fall semester because the way the credits work would allow him to graduate a semester earlier than he could at his home school.

Although I understand the logic of providing a curriculum that helps maintain a smooth transition from an alternative to a traditional school, if a student finds the traditional curriculum to be irrelevant, then more-of-the-same curriculum will be no more effective, regardless of the class size or student-to-teacher ratio. If, instead, a true alternative education was available, students could learn to reconnect with education in a positive way, not just as a demand for compliance and obedience, but as a source of inspiration, connection, and growth.

### **Incentives**

One further aspect of Last Chance High that is noteworthy is its incentive program. This program serves as a rewards program, similar to Positive Behavior Incentives and Support program in the public schools in Piedmont County Schools (as

described in chapter IV), but Last Chance's incentive program is much more explicit in terms of what behaviors earn or detract from points assigned towards incentive. Students start each week with a point sheet. Every day, in every class, teachers assign points based on each student's behavior and participation in class. The student handbook further explains:

The primary goal of the... point and level system is to increase student's responsibility and accountability for behavioral and academic performance. Progress through the levels is determined by his/her measurable behavior and achievement. The ... point and level system measures the individual student's adherence to behavioral expectations of the '5 Characteristics of a successful student': 1. Be prepared and responsible (BPR): Come to class with necessary materials and assignments, take your assigned seat and be quickly engaged in the lesson activities. 2. Follow Adult Directions (FAD): Cooperatively follow all adult directions upon initial request. 3. Be On Task (BOT): Actively demonstrating attention and focus on the designated instructional activity, cooperative participation and meeting the required expectations. 4. Always Speak Appropriately (ASA): Addressing students, staff members and guests with appropriate language, voice tone and level. 5. Respect Others and Yourself (ROY): Utilize appropriate physical posture and gestures, as well as appropriate physical proximity, and no physical contact with others. (p. 6)

Students can earn up to 30 points daily. In addition to classroom points, students can earn three points for attending school, two points for wearing "Standard Mode of Dress" [SMOD] (which, at Last Chance High consisted of khaki pants and a white or gray collared shirt), and other points for the start of school, homebase (which is like homeroom) behavior, and lunch. In order to have what qualifies as a "Good Day," students must earn 25 points in a day, and to earn a "Good Week," students must have 125 points, at least three "Good Days," no referrals, and no unexcused absences. On Thursdays, the principal gathers all students' point sheets, and determines who gets

incentive, which they can enjoy on Friday afternoons. Students who earned incentive have an hour at the end of the day on Fridays to do what they like under adult supervision. If the weather is nice, students go outside, and the boys play sports while the girls either also play sports, or just stand or sit in groups and talk.

**The dark side of incentives.** According to the literature that I found, the practice of providing points for appropriate behavior is quite common in alternative schools.

Dunbar (2001) describes a similar practice:

Each student carries around a conduct card, so teachers can indicate how they've behaved on that day during that period. It's a way of keeping track of their behavior. It's part of the student's behavior modification program. Later, you will see how this card serves as evidence of noncompliance to school culture and as grounds to support sentencing students to juvenile time. (p. 10)

The focus at alternative schools like Last Chance High, as well as the school that Dunbar describes, is to modify the students' behavior to conform to adults' expectations of obedience. Rather than providing an authentic alternative in terms of creating an engaging curriculum with student choice, schools like Last Chance focus on "fixing" what is wrong with the student. Shira Birnbaum (2001) shares an incident at a similar alternative where one of the students describes what the school was really teaching:

[After a visit from a legislator] ...Educators stood at the front of the assembly hall and praised the group: "We are really showing what this school is about." But the students, who had played along perfectly, couldn't resist the chance for a laugh. "You teachin' us to kiss ass...." "Know what you learn in this program?" said another to a teacher standing within earshot. "You learn to suck up." (pp. 103-104)

Students learn that if they don't "suck up," then their behavior in school could be used against them in court, and could land them in juvenile detention depending on the severity and frequency of their "bad" conduct. Students also learn that their "bad" behavior is their own choice; they have only themselves to blame. As Baltadano (2012) stated, and I addressed in the last chapter, "They blame themselves for their own failures regardless of the structural constraints they may face. A 'mismanaged life' becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers..." (p. 493). Students do not learn to examine how racism and oppression have played a role in creating an educational system that does not meet their needs, but rather learn to simply see school as a place where they must learn to "suck up," or face consequences. These students do not have the opportunity to learn from educators like Jose Gonzalez, the math teacher from the movie *Precious Knowledge*, who ties learning about percentages with incarceration, while simultaneously explaining to students that "there is bias in the system," (Palos, 2011), but instead students in alternatives like Last Chance High learn what neoliberalism teaches: failure is the fault of the individual.

When I shadowed some participants, I had the opportunity to witness "Incentive," and students generally seemed to appreciate and enjoy the chance to let off some steam, just be themselves for a bit, with minimal direction or instruction from any adults. However, I was really surprised to see some of the students who had been rewarded with "Incentive," because I one boy in particular had been extremely disruptive in two classes that I observed. He was not one of my participants, so I didn't know him, but he had the same schedule as some of my participants, and as an observer, I found myself losing

patience with his constant demands for teachers' attention. When the teacher didn't give him the attention he desired, he distracted other students from their work, or walked out of class. I asked the adult supervisor about incentive, and he explained that generally two-thirds of the students at Last Chance earn incentive, but he doesn't know if it's really about the students or about the teachers. In my notes I wrote:

[He] tells me he's not sure if the incentive is for the teachers or the students because he can't believe some of these kids deserve incentive, but this way the teachers can be free of students for the last period on Fridays.

From my perspective, this incentive program, while well-intentioned, serves to reinforce nearly the opposite behavior than it claims. Students know that their teachers want to enjoy some peace and quiet at the end of the day on Fridays, so they know that unless they act up to the point where they get removed from class, the teacher can assign points as she sees fit. Students can test the limits to see how much a teacher will accept before assigning a consequence that neither the student nor the teacher really wants: class during the last period of Friday afternoon.

### **Nonalternative**

As McNulty and Roseboro (2009) described, the "alternative" education provided to these students was not truly alternative, but rather mirrored both public school and prison. Although most teachers seemed to genuinely care about their students, and did their best to support them, remain patient under trying circumstances, and provide instruction based on state curriculum, the alternative school seemed as much a "last chance" for success as a preparation for imprisonment. Finally, by offering day-old

leftovers from other schools for lunch, as is the case at Last Chance High, students get the message loud and clear: they are second-class citizens. Mary Hollowell (2009) suggests that rather than providing more of the same schooling to students who are unsuccessful in public school, educators could create other possibilities. She argues that rather than preparing these students for incarceration, perhaps educators might consider providing experiences that are simultaneously educative and liberating:

The answer to chronically disruptive students in our public schools is not confinement. It is not boot camps and it is certainly not computer self-instruction, in which unmotivated students are expected to motivate themselves, devoid of relationships with teachers.... The solution to chronically disruptive youth is, ironically, the exact opposite of confinement. It is freedom. It is freedom of choice and movement (within certain boundaries) that is guided by creative, compassionate, healthy adults who facilitate last-ditch learning. Let us embody the ideologies of star teachers and embrace the therapeutic philosophy of alternative schooling and wholeheartedly pursue it. (p. 174)

If adults would listen to students who are not successful in mainstream public schools, and if educators could be flexible and creative in educating these students, I am certain that all students could be successful by attending a school that meets their needs. Some students are successful at Last Chance High. I witnessed a “Closing Ceremony,” where the administrator, teachers, and students celebrated the successful completion of fellow students’ assigned time at the school. These students were returning to their “home school,” and they made sincere speeches about how grateful they were to Last Chance High for giving them the opportunity to succeed. However, I feel unconvinced that they learned much more beyond basic content and some measure of self-control based on an external reward system. How will they fare in their home base when they do not get

“Incentive,” and how will they fare in the world of work? The primary lesson they learn is self-control, but they learn to control their behavior out of a desire to earn rewards and resist consequences, not because they feel any intrinsic motivation to do so.

However, Last Chance High, and alternatives like it, will not meet the needs of all of the students who are forced in by court assignment. For these students, such a school is simply preparation for future incarceration. As one of my participants, LeLe explains:

‘Cause it’s like, when you’re here you have no freedom. Like, it’s like, basically you’re like locked up in jail. And it’s like, this is really boring. We don’t, our PE class is not a real PE class, like all our classes are really boring, there’s no real, like you don’t get to choose your classes.... So I feel like they’re telling us what we have to do and take any rights that we have away.

LeLe further explained that she often preferred to go to Behavioral Intervention Program (BIP), which served as In School Suspension, rather than attend class because there at least she could sleep. Instead of boring students so much that they would prefer sleeping over learning, and instead of taking away their ability to make life-sustaining choices, educators might consider Hollowell’s (2009) suggestion of offering more freedom to students whose growing need for autonomy is not being met, and instead is being stifled. When students complain about not having choices, adults would do well to consider providing them with some freedom. Young people need to learn how to make big decisions in order to be responsible, thoughtful, and active citizens. Rather than focusing our attention on teaching them how to behave in ways deemed appropriate, educators could better serve the needs of young people by allowing them to make choices, make mistakes, even, and learn from them.

Not too surprisingly, students enrolled in Last Chance High did not score well on standardized exams. With a transient population, and with the more-of-the-same philosophy being employed with students for whom public school was ineffective, only ten percent of students enrolled passed both math and English standardized exams in the 2011-2012 school year (NC School Report Card. (2011-2012). Coercion is ineffective, and making behavioral demands of students, and especially from those who have already experienced some form of failure at the hands of public schools, will not create an engaged, compassionate citizenry. Rather, such practice will alienate young people from trusting and participating in institutions that are supposed to prepare them for the future. If, instead, adults really listened to students, allowed them to make choices and mistakes, offered an authentic education, and taught students life-sustaining practices that touched students' spirits, then educators create the possibility of an a true alternative education that I believe would benefit students and society as a whole.

### **Progressive Alternatives**

Education can, and should, be complicated. There is no one right answer to how best to educate youth for an unpredictable future. Just as different students have varying needs, interests, and capabilities, school practices and policies should vary. Rather than standardizing education, I believe that in the U.S., it would make sense to democratize and innovate education to fit a variety of learning styles. In this section, I will examine progressive alternative practices that reflect my core values. The first section will explore practices of an authentic education which is primary for students to value the knowledge and skills that a teacher hopes to impart. Next, I will address democratic

education, and ways that schools provide students with opportunities to make important decisions about their own educational experiences. In the third section, I address multicultural education practices, though mostly I found that the practices provide ethnic studies for one particular group, rather than multicultural studies. However, ethnic studies programs can offer a glimpse into ways that multicultural education could be successful. The fourth section will address current practices in social justice education, including a variety of ways that students may engage in social justice in ways that connect to their classroom learning. Finally, I will focus on some ways that schools provide opportunities for spiritual growth, specifically through meditation and nonviolent communication (NVC). Educating for peace and compassion builds the foundation for a just, democratic society that recognizes all people as worthy of care.

### **Authentic Education with Authentic Assessments**

Fred Neumann, Helen Marks, and Adam Gamoran (1996) explain that authentic teaching is extremely rare, and that even students whose learning is authentic still reveal disparity in terms of standardized test scores, though they believe that the disparity is lessened when students are provided opportunities for authentic learning:

... We found that it is possible for schools to provide authentic instruction reasonably equitably and that its effect on students' academic achievement is reasonably equitable... Neither gender, race, ethnicity, nor socioeconomic status affected the impact of authentic pedagogy on authentic academic achievement. (p. 306)

In other words, Neumann, Marks, and Gamoran (1996) conclude that authentic learning provides an equitable education to all students. They explain that learning is more

impactful when students can connect learning to their experiences, and in reality standardized tests are not an accurate measure of learning because authentic learning connects more to students' experiences than their ability to succeed on tests.

Our criterion of value beyond school is consistent with the constructivist position that learning will be more adaptive or powerful when students can connect new info to their own experiences.... When students' achievements are valued only because they contribute to a record of success in school, success in these tasks often carries no adaptive value, because large numbers of students consider school to be only a restricted, even an insignificant, arena of personal experience. (p. 286)

If students don't value the tests, and don't view the tests as a true reflection of their learning, than the results of the tests cannot accurately measure student learning. Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Ancess, and Susanna Wichterle Ort (2002) further explain:

A study of more than two thousand students in 23 restructured schools found higher achievement on performance tasks for students who experienced what the researchers termed "authentic pedagogy" – instruction focused on active learning calling for higher-order thinking, extended writing, and an audience for student work (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995). The NELS [National Education Longitudinal Study] also found that students in schools with high levels of "authentic instruction" experienced greater achievement gains (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). (p. 642)

Because authentic pedagogy focuses on higher-order thinking, its success or failure cannot be measured by standardized multiple-choice exams. An authentic education reaches beyond memorization of facts and vocabulary, and instead touches students by impacting their ability to think deeply, reflect on their learning, and communicate clearly.

Schools may offer an authentic education in a variety of ways, but one aspect that most schools that provide authentic learning have in common is that students are not simply sitting at desks. Rather, students are outside, in their communities, learning from the world around them, not just from textbooks, lectures, and worksheets. Louis A. Yamauchi (2003) describes an alternative program at a public high school in Hawaii that incorporates the culture and values of the community. He explains that because only eight percent of the teachers in Hawaiian schools are from Hawaii, they often have different expectations about students' attitudes, values, and learning styles, and additionally, students may not find the curriculum relevant as it is taught in the classroom (p. 380). Yamauchi explains how teachers in the Hawaiian Studies Program connect content with culture to make learning relevant to students:

The field work examples are related to contextualized instruction because academic concepts and skills are presented within a context that is familiar to students. While conducting field work in native plant reforestation, students learn about concepts such as the ecosystem, genetic diversity, and biological adaptation. Through their archaeological field work, students participate in measurement and excavation of sites, which requires them to solve problems using mathematical and spatial understandings. In environmental science, students learn about scientific concepts of biology and chemistry through participation in studies of their own community. They learn how their efforts to reestablish native flora and fauna are similar to environmental activism in other parts of the world and about the influence of global economics and politics on local affairs. (p. 383)

This program helps students see the relevancy of the content students need to learn because it allows them to go out into their communities and see how adults they know from their communities use the content of the curriculum that they learn in school. This helps them to value school learning to the point where they don't have to ask, "Why do

we have to know this?” They can see why they need the information and skills that their teachers offer when they step outside the school, out into the larger world.

Students stay with the same team of teachers for two years, which allows authentic caring more time to develop. According to Yamauchi (2003):

Ceppi (2000) found that when asked what they appreciate most about the program, many HSP [Hawaiian Study Program] students describe the feeling of *'ohana* (family) among students and their teachers. The youth feel that there are others who know and care about them. They develop a sense of identity as HSP students and a connection to the HSP community of teachers, students, and community partners. There is a sense of camaraderie, as students support each other both academically and socially. (p. 388)

Because of the two years together, and because teachers reach out into the community, and learn with students about their content alongside their cultural values, practices, and beliefs, the relationships between teachers and students can be much richer than in a traditional public school where teachers usually work with students for one year, or sometimes one semester, and only on school grounds, the teachers' "turf." By going out into the "real world," teachers may be outside their comfort level initially, but through learning with students they all grow together. Students can feel that their traditions and culture are honored and respected in their education, rather than feel that school culture is in conflict with home culture, and that their home values are not understood and not appreciated in school, which is more commonly the experience of public school students whose home culture differs from school culture.

Beyond providing opportunities for authentic learning, the Hawaiian Studies Program also demands authentic assessment to ensure that students have, in fact, learned content. Students must create and present portfolios as evidence of their learning.

At these portfolio conferences, representatives from higher education, government, and business are invited as "mock interviewers." The students present their portfolios to the interviewers and engage in a mock job interview. Teachers and the interviewers observe the sessions and provide feedback to students regarding their portfolios and presentations. (Yamauchi, 2003, p. 385)

While Yamauchi does not confirm students' learning as assessed by multiple choice, standardized test measurements, presentations reveal much more about a student's learning. Some students may be good guessers on multiple choice exams, while others may understand the content, but tend to second-guess, overthink, or misunderstand questions on such tests. Rather than rely upon inaccurate "data" derived from these standardized exams, students in this program reveal much more accurately what they have learned from a more authentic form of assessment. Putting students in communication with adults, where they discuss learning together provides better insight for educators because they can gain more understanding of what students know, what they don't know, how they think about what they've learned, and where students may need to develop their ideas further.

Darling-Hammond, Aness, and Wichterle Ort (2002) also found that authentic learning involved bringing students outside the classroom so that they could learn from adults in the community. They conducted a seven-year study of the Coalition Campus Schools Project in New York City. They found that new, smaller schools "... produced,

as a group, substantially better attendance, lower incident rates, better performance on reading and writing assessments, higher graduation rates, and higher college-going rates than the previous school, despite serving a more educationally disadvantaged population of students” (p. 639). This success was not solely due to the smaller size of the school, but rather, “a number of design features... appeared to contribute to these outcomes” (p. 639). One such design feature was authentic education.

All of the schools place students in external learning experiences, such as internships and community service activities, that occur during the regular school day and are accompanied by seminars that help students to process what they are learning about the world of work. Linked to students’ interests, these may include placements in hospitals, medical research labs, nonprofit organizations, social service agencies, businesses, and schools. The experiences are part of the core program for all students, not a separate track. They are intended to help adolescents assume responsibility, learn how to engage in the world outside home and school, gain an understanding of how various kinds of organizations operate, and explore their interests. Students reported that, even when they found they did not like their chosen work or setting or when they experienced conflicts on the job, their internships made them feel more capable, responsible, and confident about solving problems and succeeding in the world beyond school. Many said the commitments that they developed in these settings spurred them on in school and motivated them to persevere. (p. 660)

Giving students the opportunity to learn and experience the world of work, the world of the community in which they live, offers them a more authentic education. They learn to understand how what they learn in the classroom is used in the world outside, and they simultaneously have the opportunity in the classroom to process and connect what they experienced to their education.

While measurable outcomes helps to reveal if one’s school experience has been successful in terms of retaining information and choosing correct answers, what students

learn when provided with an authentic education cannot be so easily measured, and also cannot be predetermined with certainty. Instead of focusing so much attention on measurable components of learning, schools that aim to provide authentic instruction must also assess learning in a more authentic way. One of the more common practices for authentic assessments is the use of portfolios, which require simultaneous assessment and learning. As Linda Darling-Hammond and Jacqueline Aness and Susanna Wichterle Ort (2002) explain in their discussion of the Coalition Campus Schools Project:

The portfolios are not only evaluation instruments but also learning experiences that engage students in what Fred Newmann et al. (1996) call “authentic achievement.” The tasks require students to organize information, engage in disciplined inquiry and analysis, communicate orally and in writing, solve problems, and make a cogent presentation before an audience. Students frequently remarked on how the portfolio experience deepened their understanding. (p. 661)

Life, as well as people, is unpredictable, and when faced with similar experiences, two people may learn different lessons from similar experiences. When adults have all the answers, and when only one answer is correct, what is learned is not only limited, but limiting, because students do not learn to question or challenge the right answer. However, even scientific discoveries and developments are made precisely through asking questions and challenging assumptions. If we are to prepare students for an uncertain future, educators must provide students with the opportunity to ask questions and unlearn the belief that only one right answer is correct. In other words, to prepare students for the future, we need to allow them to experience the world outside the classroom, provide them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, and offer context and history to deepen their understanding.

## **Democratic Education**

Despite the fact that the U.S. is a democratic nation, few opportunities exist for young people to engage in democracy in terms of their education. The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) describes democratic schools as follows:

There is no monolithic definition of democratic education or democratic schools. But what we mean here is “education in which young people have the freedom to organize their daily activities, and in which there is equality and democratic decision-making among young people and adults...” (AERO, para. 1).

AERO lists schools around the world that fit this description of democratic education.

While the United States has 97 democratic schools, I found it interesting that Germany has 21 such schools, and Israel, which is approximately the size of New Jersey, has 26 democratic schools. Considering the size and history of the United States as a democratic nation, I would have expected much more.

One example of a democratic school is the Alpine Valley School in Colorado. This school was established in 1997, and accepts students from all age ranges, which makes it one of the rare opportunities for high school students to learn in a democratic school. This school follows the Sudbury Model, which they describe thus:

Schools based on the Sudbury Model are centered around three key ideas: students (ages 5 to 18) regardless of age, are given the freedom to use their time as they wish, free age-mixing, and the school is run democratically with each student and staff receiving one vote. At Alpine Valley School, students explore the world freely at their own pace and in their own unique ways. Our school creates a learning environment free of grades and grade levels, tests, and required classes. Instead, the students set their own educational paths, making their education meaningful and relevant. Students at Alpine Valley School develop the ability to take responsibility for their actions, set priorities, deal with complex ethical issues, and work with others in a vibrant community. Alpine Valley

School provides a safe space for students to craft their identity, learn how they learn, and ultimately become happy, successful adults. (Alpine Valley School, paras. 1-3)

Although this school provides students with a unique opportunity to participate in a democratic school, of the 25 photographs posted on the website, only one showed a student of color, and he was working alone. In the photographs of classrooms or group activities, all students appear to be White. So, while the school may follow a philosophy of democratic schooling, its lack of ethnic diversity leaves me with a question about its ability to reach the wide range of students who would actually benefit from a democratic education. Similarly, the Arts & Ideas Sudbury School in Maryland also follows the Sudbury Model, and its website reveals one student of color among a sea of students who appear to be White. Additionally, this school charges over \$5,000 tuition as well as an interview fee and a visiting fee, so although the education provided may be democratic in practice, a family needs to have substantial resources to enroll children there.

Interestingly, Harmony School in Bloomington, Indiana, another democratic school listed on AERO's website, reveals a more diverse population. From the photographs on the website, students appear to be White, African-American, Latino/a, and Asian. Unlike the Alpine Valley School, Harmony School has required "core" classes for high school students, but students are encouraged to further particular interests by enrolling in college classes or through independent learning. While perhaps not as democratic as Alpine Valley or Arts & Ideas Sudbury School, students at Harmony School play an important role in governance:

Students participate in all aspects of governance in the High School, and we believe that our school community thrives when we strive toward consensus. We also believe that students need to develop skills such as listening; facilitating discussion; analyzing issues; problem solving and compromising; and making and reflecting on community decisions. Every Fall, students have the opportunity to run for Student Advisory, a group that meets to deal with issues affecting the community. In the spring, students have the opportunity to run for Student Selection Committee, a group of students and teachers that interviews prospective students and makes recommendations about admittance. (Harmony School, HS-Philosophy, para. 6)

Although Harmony School charges tuition, they do so on a sliding scale, explaining that in lieu of tuition they ask for eight percent of a family's gross monthly income, and they reveal that while the cost to educate each student is over \$6,000 annually, most students receive scholarship assistance through grants and contributions. Students at Harmony School participate in weekly meetings where they convene for nearly two hours to plan, resolve conflicts, build community, and share successes. Decisions are made by consensus, and rules reflect that each student is expected to participate and respect one another's voices, concerns, and opinions.

Eileen de los Reyes and Patricia A. Gozemba (2002) research a variety of schools that offer students the opportunity to make decisions about their education. One of the educational experiences that they describe is called the Appalachian Mountain Teen Project (AMTP), which involves about 35 teenagers who have been referred to them by the courts, parents, teachers, or counselors. The teens commit to participate in the program for six months, and during those six months they participate in outdoor adventures that allow them to build confidence, work together, and make their own

decisions. In interviews, the teens describe good teachers as those who “give students the opportunity to participate in making decisions” (p. 165). One student explains:

The class in which I seem to have accomplished most this year is the class where students have a say.... She would come to us a lot and find out what we wanted to do, to the point where she wasn't the person up at the top that had the whip and we were just people doing it. (p. 165)

Another student explains, “A lot of adults... make you feel small. But Donna and Holly [teachers at AMTP], they make you feel like you are important. They listen to you, they want your input.... They make you feel like a person” (p. 165) and yet another describes how at AMTP, teachers lead participants “without kind of leading you like a cow” (p. 165). De los Reyes and Gozempa (2002) describe how San Antonio, one of the teachers at AMTP, explains:

Teens... are not powerless; they simply have not been given the opportunity to experience their power. The belief that students have no power, San Antonio suggests, is a myth. The example she gives is a protest action, in which many New Hampshire students walked out of school in response to the state's refusal to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. She also tells the story of Naomi and another AMTP participant, who, tired of the sexual harassment in their school, decided to take action. As a result of their actions, “new sexual harassment codes were written, offending students were disciplined, and a male teacher who had violated Title IX laws did not have his contract renewed. (pp. 167-168)

A further example of a school that empowers students to participate in decision-making is the Free School in Albany, NY. Students at the Free School even decide when to hold meetings.

Here the kids also share responsibility with teachers for resolving conflicts and working through difficult school problems through our student-led council meeting system. The meetings are run by Robert's Rules of Order and afford the opportunity to explore matters in great depth if necessary. When the issue is an interpersonal conflict, the meeting becomes a supportive circle where real emotional healing takes place. Between monthly all-school meetings and council meetings, kids at The Free School quickly become fluent with the ins and outs of real participatory democracy. (The Free School, para. 4)

Similarly, in Brooklyn's Free School, students can call meetings and make decisions both large and small about what, how, and when they study (Gell, 2006). Students called a meeting to discuss boredom, and eventually they came up with an idea to have a "bored board," which offered suggestions to students who couldn't figure out how to best spend their time. Even a discussion on boredom can be educational:

Nick put the issue of boredom on the table for discussion, and hands shot up. "Contrary to popular belief, boredom is self-inflicted," suggested Silvan Carlson-Goodman, at 15 one of the school's elder statesmen. "The best cure is to just force yourself to do something, anything. Go for a walk, choreograph a musical, anything. Just do something." David Easton, a 26-year-old instructor and self-described refugee from the New York Teaching Fellows program, added: "There's nothing wrong with being bored. In fact, it's actually the first step in figuring out what you really want to do." (Gell, 2006, para. 24)

When students are empowered to make decisions, call meetings, discuss and resolve issues, and determine their educational paths, they learn through their democratic education. They gain experience in making decisions, asking questions, and resolving conflict through discussion. In this way, a democratic education is an authentic education, because the students will not choose to be educated in areas that feel irrelevant or in ways that they find alienating. Rather, they will choose to follow their interests, which will naturally engage them. They will not need to be coerced into learning, they

will not be influenced by threats of low grades, but instead, they will learn because they are curious, and because they are challenged by things they do not know.

Democratic schools are not easy; in fact, they are quite messy and many debates and disagreements are inevitable. However, a vibrant democracy should be messy, and in order to prepare students to participate actively in democracy, they should have the opportunity to practice. Meier (1995) argues that democratic schools require support from the larger public precisely because they are so messy; if the community refuses to support a school that requires debate and active participation, the school will not succeed. Meier (1995) explains:

...Democratic schools are impossible to implement without an aware and supportive public, their defense requires us to tell the truth in all kinds of unexpected ways. Even when it gets complicated. Telling our fellow citizens that they didn't get the education they deserved in a way that will not be misheard isn't easy. Schools did the job they were asked to do-but never before have they done what is needed today. It will help if we explore ways to talk about the past that don't rest on nostalgia but on unearthed primary sources-how children really wrote, what they really read, and why they left school in such droves.... The reason to reform our schools is that we believe in fairness and democracy. We can no longer defend the discrepancies between the haves and have-nots, nor pay the price for the social unrest these discrepancies create. Ultimately, if we stick together we can do far better for everyone. (pp. 82-83)

One of the most common refrains that I hear in a public school staff workroom when teachers complain about students is some variation of, "it was good enough for me," with the implication being if the education that I was offered was good enough for me, why is the same education that I am offering to students not good enough for them? Why should I change my ways, when these ways were effective enough for me to get my education? Unfortunately, teachers often fail to realize that their students are not living in the same

world, with the same circumstances, and often without the same benefits and privileges that many White, middle-class educators grew up experiencing. Additionally, society changes over time; education should change as well. Adults who work at a democratic school, as well as parents who send their children to such schools, must recognize that in order to best prepare children for the future, we need to equip them with appropriate ways of questioning the status quo, as well as an ability to consider a range of possibilities, the potential impact of various options, and the beneficiaries of such options. Democratic education must empower students as more important than content. Students must be empowered to question the authority of the content that they learn. Who says that this information is the truth? Why? Who benefits from this version of truth? Who is hurt by it? Students must learn to consider these questions and search through multiple perspectives to find answers that give a full and well-rounded, rich, diverse, and full picture of reality.

When only one right answer exists, as must be the case for multiple-choice tests, then the information becomes more important than the students, questions are limited or stifled completely, and learning is reduced to superficial understanding and rote memorization. Students become identified by their test scores, and are treated and educated based on that number. Rather than focusing attention on the “twos” who, with extra support, may be able to become a “three,” which is a passing test score, and having the “twos” attend extra tutoring sessions instead of their “encore” classes, like art, band, or drama, a democratic education does not classify students by their test scores. Each student has the freedom to remain in all their classes, enjoying art as well as science,

while learning to view the world through multiple perspectives, rather than passively accepting the one right answer provided from an expert authority.

Finally, Meier (1995) addresses the need for basic respect for the humanity of all the people in the school building:

Schools are the conscious embodiment of the way we want our next generation to understand their world and their place in it.... If mutual respect is the bedrock condition necessary for a healthy democracy, then it must be the foundation of schooling. Making it so is an awesome and endlessly fascinating task. (p. 135)

Meier argues that there is no one simple answer that will fit all schools, all communities, or all children. Instead, a variety of schools should exist, all with the goal of preparing the future generations for a vibrant democracy. If teachers want to see a future where all citizens are respected, all views are considered, and all people are, in fact, treated equally, or more appropriately, equitably, then we need to educate with that end in mind.

Surprisingly, I have found no studies that examine the success or failure of democratic schools. A search of “democratic high schools” led to articles about students’ attitudes towards democracy, how ROTC programs may impact “democratic maturity,” various aspects of civics courses, or how some political leader impacted school policy, but my search led to no mention of an actual school based on a democratic philosophy. Although democratic schools exist in the U.S., it appears that few researchers have taken enough interest in them to examine their practices and their impact. Furthermore, despite the fact that U.S. citizens take great pride in our democratic form of governance, schools that aim to operate on a democratic basis require financial resources that many families do not have. I found no public schools that operate on democratic principles. Students in

public schools have few options in terms of their curriculum, the method of instruction, and assessment practices. The only way that a student may experience a truly democratic education is if their family has the financial ability to pay for the cost of such an education. Ironically, the education that the U.S. provides for free offers little to students in terms of giving them the opportunity to experience democratic governance.

### **Multicultural Education/Ethnic Studies**

As addressed in the previous chapter, multicultural education incorporates the history, cultures, and experiences of a broad range of people. The intention of multicultural education is to create an education that truly mirrors the diversity of cultures and experiences that exist in the U.S. Multicultural education grew out of the needs of specific populations whose history and heritage were not being addressed in public school, and so schools and courses started to crop up during the 60s and 70s, as a result of the growing Civil Rights Movement. At that time, groups focused on their own needs, and addressed their own culture and history in ethnic studies. Although I have not found literature addressing current practices of school-wide multicultural education, a few schools offer ethnic studies to meet the needs of a specific population. For example, the Hawaiian Studies program focuses on the needs of a predominantly Hawaiian student body (Yamauchi, 2003). Similarly, the Tucson Unified School District [TUSD] offers a powerful program that offers students authentic learning opportunities, culturally relevant teaching, as well as some forms of democratic learning. The Mexican American Studies program has seen great success, even in traditional measures such as test scores and graduation rates. Anita Fernandez and Zoe Hammer (2012) explain:

TUSD's Mexican-American Studies program has not only been successful in ensuring that Latin@ students stay in school, it has surpassed the percentage of students not enrolled in the program with higher standardized test scores, higher graduation rates and a higher rate of students attending college after high school (Scott, 2011). Graduates of the Mexican-American Studies program not only excel in these standard measures of success, they also surpass their peers with attributes that colleges and universities look for when considering admission of students. These include: exceptional communication skills, both written and oral; diversity of thought and openness to multiple perspectives; and the ability to apply theoretical concepts to the analysis of every day issues. (p. 66)

The Mexican American Studies program provides an education that covers “traditional” school content in a way that intentionally connects the content with the heritage and cultural values of the majority of its students. In one class, students discuss a “No pass, no play” policy, where students must pass all courses in order to play on a school sponsored sports team. The teacher proposes that students think more deeply than those who created and implemented the policy: “Monitor the way you think: when you start blaming the person, that’s a naïve consciousness” (Palos, 2011). Rather, he suggests that students look at structures and systems that might impede students of color and prevent them from experiencing success in the classroom. Such a policy may be seen as reversing the benefit that participation in sports may experience. Instead of punishing students who struggle with classroom learning, allowing them to participate on a team may be the only place on school grounds where some students can succeed, and the work habits and support network that student athletes experience on the team can serve to support strong habits that could help them to be successful in the classroom. Students in every class are encouraged and expected to gain “the ability to apply theoretical concepts to the analysis of every day issues” (Fernandez and Hammer, 2012, p. 66), so not only do

they learn topics expected of public high school students, but they learn these topics in the context of their own lives, and of the lives of those in their communities.

Not only is the material relevant, but the relationships formed among students and teachers are clearly authentic and profound. In a history class, the teacher addresses the immigration debate. He explains, “They teach you to believe that we don’t belong here.... That we’re brand new. That we just got here. Well, I’m here to tell you that your culture is at least 7,000 years old” (Palos, 2011).” Not only does the teacher explain that their culture is ancient, older than the United States, but that the land where they live, eat, study, and sleep was not always the United States; once it was Mexico. By making students aware of this fact, he is telling students that they belong here. They are home. Students hear the message. Students in the documentary say the following:

I just feel comfortable here. It’s like a second, a second home I guess you could say. I hate it when I can’t be here.  
I learned so much in these classes.  
In other classes, it’s just like, let’s get this work done, but in this class, there’s meaning to that work.  
They expect more. They challenge me more.  
I’ve never worked so hard. (Palos, 2011)

Dr. Augustine Romero, Director of St Equity, TUSD, explains from the adults’ perspective:

If you can narrow down what we advocate for, it’s the idea of love. It’s not simply love for myself. It’s the love for those around me. How can I change the world for the better and what this idea of social justice pedagogy asks us to do is to seek the route of the truth. And in that truth, there is greater justice. (Palos, 2011)

For the educators in the program, teaching ethnic studies, and teaching in ethnically sensitive ways serve to teach students love because when students know their own history, and know the history of their people's struggles against oppression, they get a deeper appreciation for who they are and where they come from. When students feel aware that they come from the people and culture that they are studying, they feel connected to their learning and one another in a profound way.

Students in the Mexican American program learn that freedom, one of the founding principles of the United States, means being able to ask questions. Unfortunately, school board members in Tucson decided to cut the program because they claimed that it taught ethnic hatred. According to Hing (2012):

...Gov. Jan Brewer signed HB 2281, which barred Arizona public schools from teaching courses which advocated "the overthrow" of the United States government; encouraged "ethnic solidarity" or "promote resentment" toward any other ethnic group. The law was directly specifically at Tucson's Mexican-American studies program, state schools chief Tom Horne admitted. School districts found violating the law could have lost 10 percent of their state funding as punishment. (para. 1)

Despite the fact that students in the program invited school board members to their classes to see what they were actually learning in the MAS program, only one member showed up for one class, and students spoke with him directly about their experience in the program. He later stated that he simply felt that the teachers had prepared the students for his visit, and he voted with the others to shut down the program (Palos, 2011). Rather than teaching racial hatred, however, school board members could not recognize that the MAS program, in fact, was teaching students how to recognize and

resist the standardized neoliberalist education that is offered in the more traditional public schools. For example, when the teacher that I mentioned previously told his students that they belong in the U.S., and that, in fact, their culture has been part of this land for 7,000 years, the teacher is telling students that they belong to this land, this country, as much as anyone else. Tucson used to be part of Mexico, so how could it be the case that Mexicans who live there now are “illegal” when it is part of what was once their homeland? The teacher challenges students to consider who has the power to define who belongs to the land, and together, students and teachers resist the school board’s attempts to close down a program that teaches students to ask dangerous and powerful questions that challenge authority. I would add further that love in this context is expressed by working together to make this country live up to the ideals that it was founded upon, and that means asking tough questions, facing painful and honest answers, and collaborating with others who share the same hopes to make this a free and equal society.

Jason Nelson-Brown (2005) describes another “ethnic school” that existed for 25 years, called Mount Zion Ethnic School, in Seattle, Washington. Mount Zion was created in 1977 in a predominantly and historically Black church (p. 40). Unfortunately, the school closed due to internal conflict and the dismissal of director of the learning center, but while it existed, it provided students with an education that the community valued (p. 51). Brown explains that while he could not find an objective way to determine what the school accomplished or its impact on the students who enrolled, these are not relevant questions to establish a school’s value.

Such a line of questioning... assumes a production model as definitive of useful education. It might be better to understand such programs in terms of capacity building and symbolic value (Bolman & Deal, 1997). This is not to say that... ethnic schools are not productive of educational value as it might be commonly understood in mainstream formal education.... The symbolic value of an ethnic school may be its first and greatest impact.... Its existence draws the community to it not only for its content but also as a symbol of strength and possibility.... The creation and maintenance of ethnic ... programs can help to break down entrenched attitudes of resistance, or at least gatekeeping rationales and controlling images that constrain their ability to participate on equal footing with other communities (Collins, 2000). (pp. 55-56)

Nelson-Brown argues that ethnic schools benefit the entire community they serve by providing beacons of hope, strength, and empowerment. He explains that while teachers provided a curriculum that paralleled the public school curriculum, they also aimed to teach students about their own ethnic history and values, and in doing so, inspired the surrounding community to recognize its value. Such a school not only helped empower the community, but it also served as a symbol to those outside the community. Those who live in a community that establishes an ethnic school are forced to recognize that members of that community value their children's education, and actively create an education that they feels better meets the needs of their children.

Teaching in ways that are culturally relevant, and exploring the history and experiences of people from the wide range of cultures that made the United States the country it is today provides students with a more accurate, thorough, and richer understanding of their own experiences, regardless of their own ethnic background. Teaching in this way will resonate with more students as they can recognize themselves, their families, and their heritage in the content of their classes, and at the same time, multicultural education will help students who come from families of privilege to

recognize the struggles that others face that they themselves may not have recognized as part of their own experience. They may better understand the impact of their privilege, and they can see the value in working with others to dismantle their privilege in order to create a more democratic and egalitarian society. A multicultural education can work towards creating a more humane nation where the contributions and struggles of all people are recognized and honored.

### **Social Justice Education**

I view social justice education as the link that ties authentic, democratic, and multicultural education together. Social justice education is authentic because it ties classroom learning with real-world experiences. It is democratic because the aim of social justice education is to recognize and listen to the needs of all students, and especially those whose needs and voices have traditionally been ignored, and respects the humanity of all people, without considering one person, or one group of people to be superior, more important, or more powerful than another. Given that, social justice education must be multicultural. All people deserve to be heard, recognized, and supported, regardless of their income, culture, age, ability, etc.

One example of a social justice education is in New York City, and it's called Facing History School. Michael Nakkula (2013) describes the school as inspiring students to connect the education that they receive in the classroom with social justice activity in the community. He says that the school implements “anti-bias education, civic engagement, and social justice strategies...” (p. 61) and he explains that students who

have fallen behind in public school need “motivation, engagement with school, and authentic ownership” of their education (p. 60). Students at Facing History School:

...described an attitudinal shift when they were exposed to and subsequently immersed in civic engagement projects that they found inspiring. Through opportunities such as working on immigration rights or homelessness, students became inspired to make a contribution in these areas both in the short-term and as potential careers. (p. 62)

Social justice education provides students with exposure to inspiring civic engagement projects, and such exposure cannot help but transform students’ perceptions of themselves, of their ability to enact change, and of their community. Many teachers speak about the best moments of teaching as when they see “the light go on” in their students’ eyes, or the “a-ha moment,” when a student clearly comprehends something that she hadn’t before. I still clearly remember the sense of humility and awe I felt when one of my sixth grade students read in English for the first time. I remember the pride in his face, and what felt like electricity around the moment. When students engage in social justice projects, they can appreciate being on both sides of the “a-ha” moment. They may simultaneously feel amazed to recognize their ability to inspire change, and humbled by the power that comes with such a transformative endeavor. They can recognize the light that has turned on inside themselves, and they can experience the impact of that light in their communities.

The MAS program described previously also incorporates elements of social justice in terms of student activism. Fernandez and Hammer (2012) explain:

The MAS program essentially encourages students to put grassroots democracy into action: by knowing their histories, learning to measure and analyze social inequality in their own communities, understanding the law, and analyzing political and social movements, students learn why they should and how they can participate in shaping the future. (p. 66)

Although both the MAS Program and the Hawaiian Studies Program provide ethnic studies, the MAS program is much more explicitly political, and students spend more time considering how to put the knowledge that they've learned in the classrooms to use in their communities, rather than the other way around. The Hawaiian Studies Program connects classroom learning to the community in vibrant and authentic ways, and students see the values of home connected to school values in ways that enhance the relevancy of their education, but in the MAS Program, students learn to look at the world through a more political orientation. They look at problems in their communities with an eye towards social justice, and they find ways to actively create the future that they want to see in their home communities.

A core element of TUSD's program is teaching students to apply academic skills to make positive change in their communities. TUSD's program follows the model of teaching labeled "Critically Compassionate Intellectualism" (Cammarota & Romero, 2009) combining culturally relevant, social justice curriculum with critically conscious pedagogy and a focus on relationships – between teachers, students, and families. (p. 66)

Although Julio Cammarota and Augustine Romero (2011) do not specify if they worked with the MAS program in Tucson, AZ, they describe a curriculum that they created and implemented with educators and Latina/o high school students in Tucson. They explain that they worked at a specific high school in the Tucson Unified School

District, which is the same district that housed the MAS program, so it seems likely that they collaborated in some fashion. Cammarota and Romero (2011) explain that they “directed and implemented a unique social science program emphasizing participatory action research (PAR) for Latina/o high school students” (p. 489). They explain that during three periods per week students and teachers focused on U.S. history and government curriculum, and during two periods per week, they focused on PAR (p. 495). The curriculum worked in tandem with the social science requirements for juniors and senior, and the intention was to “help students enhance their level of critical consciousness through a curriculum that meets state standards and affords them the opportunity to develop sophisticated critical analyses of their own social contexts” (p. 489).

Students learned ethnographic research methods, and created their own projects based on the needs they perceived in their own communities. The authors describe one incident where a Mexican student had a Mexican flag removed by a school security guard because the guard said that the flag represented gang affiliation. The student then conducted research, wrote a poem that revealed the injustice inherent in the guard’s action, and the young man recited his poem to teachers, administrators, and district officials. The school principal was able to recognize how the action of the security guard violated the student’s rights, and he immediately took action to prevent similar actions to occur in his school (pp. 497-498). Another project included a student advocating for greater enrollment of Latina/o students in the school’s Advanced Placement (AP) courses. She took photographs of students in different classes, noting the resources

available and the demographics of the students in various classes. She then created a presentation revealing that in many (non-AP) classes, some students did not speak any English. These students sat together in the back of the classrooms chatting in Spanish, and their educational needs were being ignored (pp. 501-503). The presentation revealed to teachers and administrators, as well as students and parents, that students were not receiving an equal education, even when they sat in the same classrooms. Rather than modifying instruction to provide visual and kinesthetic cues to students who spoke little English, rather than ensuring that English language learners got some sense of the content of the lesson through basic vocabulary, teachers simply ignored these students, and so even though the young people were sitting in class, they were not getting anything resembling an education.

Cammarota and Romero (2011) describe how PAR "...represents the method for social justice youth development such that young people's inquiries and attendant actions promote healthy, positive identities, community activism, and empathy for other people's struggles" (p. 503), and they further explain:

The SJEP [Social Justice Education Project] pedagogy provides not only the necessary link to social justice youth development but also the critical knowledge required to establish the link in the first place. This critical knowledge derives from what we call a social justice epistemology in which students study and gain insights that lead to both personal and social transformation. The insights or knowledge foster an awareness of how to redefine one's self, community, and world in more positive, just terms. These redefinitions are necessary for young people to feel capable and competent as agents of change, whether the change is initiated at individual, institutional, or societal levels. (p. 503)

Social justice education empowers students to identify injustice in their lives, and to take action to create change. Even though no guarantees exist that students' projects, presentations, and poems may actually create change, taking action gives people a sense of hope and power. Taking action tells those in positions of power that those who are being ruled by that power recognize the injustice as injustice, and will not accept it as simply "the way things are." Rather, social justice education teaches students that they can take action, and while some actions may not produce immediate change, if the cause is one that inspires others to also take action, then eventually change is possible. Furthermore, social justice education and youth participatory action research allow students to recognize that, unlike the neoliberal stance that success and failure depend solely on the individual, structures and systems exist that serve to benefit some and aid in their success while hurting others. Cammarota and Fine (2008) explain:

Through participatory action research, youth learn how to study problems and find solutions to them. More importantly, they study problems and drive solutions to obstacles preventing their own well-being and progress. Understanding how to overcome these obstacles becomes critical knowledge for the discovery of one's efficacy to produce personal as well as social change. Once a young person discovers his or her capacity to effect change, oppressive systems and subjugating discourses no longer persuade him or her that the deep social and economic problems he or she faces result from his or her own volition. Rather, the discovery humanizes the individual, allowing him or her to realize the equal capabilities and universal intelligence in all humans, while acknowledging the existence of problems as the result of social forces beyond his or her own doing. (pp. 6-7)

Teaching young people how to take action in order to implement social change helps them to understand that the struggles that they face are not simply a result of their own, personal failures or shortcomings, but rather, reflect the complex reality of their

experiences. It may be possible that a student is unsuccessful in school due to his own lack of effort, but at the same time, it is also possible that he failed to put forth effort because the education that he is experiencing may be dull and/or lack relevancy to his own experience. He may not recognize how his lessons in history reflect his own experience if the history he is taught does not include the history of people who look like and speak like him. He may not see the value in reading literature if the themes, characters, and conflicts in the literature he is assigned do not enrich his life. By teaching students to recognize that problems they face are “the result of social forces beyond his or her own doing” (Cammara and Fine, p. 7) and that they have the power, creativity, and ability to take some actions to make change, adults can help students create the education that they need in order to prepare them to build the future that they want to see.

### **Spirit-learning**

The aim of what I call spirit-learning is to teach students to access their own inner wisdom as well as their sense of awe and wonder. Although public schools must (and should) stay away from explicit religious instruction, education can help students get in touch with their spirit, regardless of their faith, or lack of faith. Spirit-learning is about finding one’s inner self, often hidden underneath the more common forms of self-identification, such as through membership in various groups, personality traits, achievements and other ego-gratifying means. Where personality establishes the boundaries of identity, establishing who one is and who one isn’t, spirit-learning focuses on what it means to be fully alive, and fully human. Spirit-learning helps people

recognize the profound miracle of everyone's existence, and such learning rarely happens in schools.

However, some schools incorporate elements of what I call spirit-learning. Diverse components of spirit-learning may serve to provide students with an embodied experience of peace and wisdom. Practices such as meditation and non-violent communication (NVC) create the possibility for students to experience peace and also teach students how to engage in difficult conversations and experiences in ways that promotes peace. While I did not find studies of entire schools focused on teaching peace or addressing students' spiritual needs, I was able to discover studies of programs or classes that implemented those practices.

**Meditation.** Meditation allows practitioners to become more mindful, or aware of the present moment at all moments. Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein (2010) explain mindfulness as:

...being fully aware of whatever is happening in the present moment, without filters or the lens of judgment.... Mindfulness consists of cultivating awareness of the mind and body and living in the here and now.... Some of the greatest benefits of mindfulness come from examining your mental processes... observing them dispassionately, as a scientist would. Because this allows great insight into habitual ways of thinking, it has a profound power to alleviate stress and suffering. (p. 15)

Mindfulness meditation helps practitioners to be more familiar with patterns of thinking because one's focus is trained on breathing in and out. Thoughts frequently interrupt that focus, but with practice, practitioners can watch the patterns of thoughts that their minds take. Then they can recognize unhealthy thought habits and become less attached to

them. They can recognize that their deliberations are not necessarily true or beneficial, and with practice they can let go of those thoughts and those patterns of thoughts. If young people can learn to examine their thought patterns in this way, then they have a lifetime to practice and refine being in the present moment, rather than being caught up in habitual thoughts as well as getting trapped by the emotions that those thoughts inspire. Schoeberlein (2009) lists some of the benefits of mindfulness practice, which is another way of saying meditation:

Regular mindfulness practice trains attention, promotes emotional balance, fosters a sense of well-being, and thus leads to physiological and anatomical changes in the brain associated with these experiences. Other changes in the body demonstrate further benefits of ongoing mindfulness practice, including heightened immunity, improved stress-management skills, and reduced exposure to stress hormones. These health-related outcomes are relevant at school, since good health makes teaching easier and more effective. It also promotes learning and successful performance in both students and teachers. (p. 8)

Tamar Mendelson et al. (2010) explains that "...interventions involving meditation with youth have been reported to reduce distress, anxiety, and emotional and behavioral reactivity and improve self-awareness and sleep among youth (Bootzin and Stevens 2005; Napoli et al. 2005; Semple et al. 2005; Wall 2005)," (p. 986). Mendelson and her co-authors further state that an optimal time to introduce young people to meditation occurs between the ages of ten to fifteen, and they further share the impact that young people themselves say that meditation has had on them:

Responses indicated that students generally had a positive experience in the program and felt they learned skills that helped them in their day-to-day lives: "The program has helped me because now I know different routines and exercises that I can do at home that helps me lower and reduce my stress. So

whenever I get stressed out I can just do a pose and sometimes I can show my mother and my family." - 4th grade girl. "Most important thing I learned in the program is that it's all different ways to deal with your stress like instead of fighting and stuff." - 5th grade boy. "It helps you relieve stress when you really feel stressed out or you're really mad and focus on what's inside of you and just make sure that you stay calm." - 5th grade girl. (p. 989)

Because meditation teaches practitioners to work with their minds and emotions, it is a practice that provides stability, resiliency, and grounding. Regardless of the religious tradition that people often associate with meditation, the reality is that by working with our thought patterns, by learning to focus our attention, meditation has been proven to be useful through a variety of medical and scientific studies.

Erica M.S. Sibinga, et al. (2011) further address benefits of mindfulness practice in terms of a study conducted with "urban youth." They studied not only the effectiveness of teaching "urban youth" about meditation and mindfulness, but also how open-minded these young people might be to learning such practices. They wanted to know if "urban youth" would be willing to learn about meditation in the first place, because if they aren't open to learning about it, then forcing meditation practice on young people will not be of much benefit.

Key findings [from a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program implemented in a study with "urban youth"] were that all participants had something positive to say about their overall experience in the MBSR program and that all participants continued to practice some form of MBSR following program completion. For most participants, the ideas and practices of meditation and yoga were quite new, and many came into the course thinking that such methods were "strange" or "weird" or that the methods presented would simply be "boring." While several participants found it difficult to get comfortable practicing certain methods presented in the course, all participants found that there was at least one method that they really "enjoyed" and continued to practice after the course was over (pp. 215-216).

Participants in my research shared a range of experiences and attitudes towards meditation, ranging from LeLe's comment: "I'll go to sleep," and Joaquin's concern that meditation might lead him to a "dark place," to Chris and John, who both enjoyed meditation. When I suggested the possibility of offering a meditation room instead of In-School Suspension (ISS) or Behavior Intervention Program, both of which serve as a time-out of sorts for students who disrupt class, Chris said, "I'd stay there all day," and John also indicated that he would prefer meditation to ISS when he said, "I'd rather, I would, too. I'd be all for the 7 hours, just straight silence." With guided instruction, an effective meditation teacher could keep LeLe awake, and could teach Joaquin how to recognize that he can effectively navigate through the depression or "dark places" that he has experienced with his past attempts at meditation. A good meditation teacher could help Joaquin recognize that the dark places where his thoughts may wander are just thoughts; when he returns his attention to his breathing, he can leave that darkness. He can learn how to control his thoughts; he doesn't need to follow them helplessly.

Teaching meditation to students who have not been served adequately in public school addresses a key concern that generally remains neglected in public school: emotional well-being. Teachers, administrators, and occasionally other public figures like police officers punish children for poor decisions and violent behavior, but as a society we have neglected to teach youth alternative ways to respond to the various challenges that they will and do face on a daily basis. In other words, adults are punishing children for not knowing how to do something that they haven't been taught;

somehow, adults expect that children should just know how to respond to struggles in mature, socially acceptable ways.

For this reason, schools that aim to teach peace should include a teacher who can guide students and staff to maintain a sustained meditation practice. In order to introduce meditation in a way that I believe will be impactful, schools might consider implementing two short, fifteen minute sessions at the beginning and end of each school day.

Especially when first learning meditation, longer sessions can be overwhelming, and people can quickly lose interest in the practice. Additionally, the meditation teacher may teach different techniques and practices, such as eating meditation, walking meditation, and various breathing techniques. By showing a variety of ways to live mindfully, I expect, like the students in Sibinga's et al. (2011) study, students and staff at a school where everyone intentionally studies how to be peaceful will find at least one practice that they enjoy and bring home with them.

Many studies examine the effects of teaching meditation to young people. I have found no studies that reveal negative impact on teaching meditation to anyone, at any age, but rather, only positive results. Mendelson, Greenberg, Dariotis, Feagans Gould, Rhoades, & Leaf (2010), and Sibinga, Kerrigan, Stewart, Johnson, Magyari, & Ellen (2011), and Feagans Gould, Dariotis and Mendelson, & Greenberg (2012) focused their attention on studying the effects of teaching meditation to "urban" youth, and found that although the participants in their studies initially knew little about meditation, generally, students had a positive experience with it once presented to them, and participants felt that meditation helped them both at school and at home. Semple, Reid, & Miller (2005)

and Sibinga, Kerrigan, Stewart, Johnson, Magyari, & Ellen (2011) address how meditation reduced participants' anxiety in their studies. Nidich, Mjasiri, Nidich, Rainforth, Grant, Valosek, Chang, & Zigler (2011) examined how meditation impacted participants' academic achievement. They show that practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM) actually increased participants' test scores:

Results from this pilot study indicate significant improvement in both math and English academic achievement in at-risk middle school students below proficiency practicing the TM program compared to controls. For the entire sample, there was a significant increase for the meditating students in math and English scale scores and performance level scores. (p. 561)

Christopher Jones, Mawiyah Clayborne, James D. Grant, and George Rutherford (2003) studied the impact of teaching meditation to youth who were identified as "at-risk." They explain, "Research on intelligence, moral development, and ego development indicates that Consciousness-Based education develops the student's latent creativity and intelligence beyond what is found through the standard system of education" (p. 247). They further state: "in an experiment with 'at-risk' students in New Jersey, after an 11-month period, the experimental group (who learned TM [Transcendental Meditation]) did significantly better than the controls on all the measures except the computer task which showed no difference" (p.250). Participants described the impact of learning meditation:

[10 year old boy] When I'm mad, I meditate and it makes me, like, express better, and I won't get hyper or nothin' like that when I'm mad. [10 year old girl] My grades improved, and my manners and my behavior. Since I started meditating, I'm more relaxed, and I'm more interested in learning. (pp. 250-251)

Because meditation has the power to change individual's lives (at any age) in ways that bring about more inner peace, focus, and awareness, I believe that the practice could be impactful in creating the peaceful, just world that those of us who work for social justice envision.

**Non-violent Communication.** Marshall B. Rosenberg (2003) has developed a system for communicating nonviolently, even in the midst of strife, and he calls it, appropriately enough, Nonviolent Communication, (NVC). Although he does not discuss meditation at all, the practice he developed contains aspects that work in tandem with meditation. He explains:

NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. NVC trains us to observe carefully, and to be able to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us. We learn to identify and clearly articulate what we are concretely wanting in a given situation. The form is simple, yet powerfully transformative. (p. 3)

Like meditation, practicing NVC helps people recognize habitual reactions, and provides an alternative way to listen and respond to situations. Basically, NVC includes four steps: observing the concrete actions that affect one's well-being; recognizing and stating one's feelings connected to the observation; identifying and sharing the needs, values, or desires that create the feelings; and requesting concrete actions in order to positively impact the situation (p. 7). Although the four-step process seems simple, learning NVC

takes time because practitioners have to overcome habitual reactions that have been used over the course of our lifetime.

One high school stands out in terms of focusing on teaching peace because it was founded on NVC principles (Hart & Göthlin, 2002). Students at the Skarpnäcks Free School in Stockholm are not only encouraged, but actively taught to make their own decisions, and while the process challenges both teachers and students alike, after four years of diligent practice, Göthlin, who founded the school observes, “The number of conflicts between students has decreased dramatically since we opened, and teachers now spend very little time dealing with conflicts. Most conflicts that occur are handled by the children” (p. 42). She also explains that most of the students arrive to school early, remain after school hours, and “express their happiness to be at school” (p. 42). Finally, to the relief of parents, she says, “Recent standardized testing for 9- and 11-year-olds in reading, math, and English show that our students are all performing at or beyond the expectations for their age” (p. 42). Although the founding philosophy of Skarpnäcks was the belief that nonviolent communication would impact students’ ability to make their own choices, the results show that NVC had far-reaching effects. Not only did students learn to get along better, resolve conflicts themselves, express their needs, and listen carefully to others’ needs, but they even learned information in a way that allowed them to test successfully.

NVC allows social justice oriented educators to practice their beliefs through their everyday communication. By providing a structure that focuses on the needs of the speaker and the listener(s), using NVC dismantles any hierarchy that may appear in more

traditional settings, and instead, honors the humanity of all people involved in the communication. Miki Kashtan (2002) explains:

The collective belief that human beings must be controlled and punished leads us to create institutions that constrain, control, and manipulate people. It predisposes us to create educational systems like the ones we have at present, where control, discipline, reward, and punishment are the norm, and where choice, spontaneity, curiosity, and inquiry are frowned upon (Tyson 1999; Simon 2001)... Rewards and punishment, blame and criticism, and the lack of meaningful choice common in the school system create apathy, despair, and cynicism. (p. 29)

Kashtan explains that such a belief leads people to have one of two roles, as that of dominator or the dominated. With this limitation, those who are dominated have just one of two choices: submit or rebel (p. 30). In contrast, NVC offers another type of relationship based on the recognition that all participants are human beings, ultimately of equal value. She further clarifies that although NVC is not going to solve all problems, and everyone's needs may not be met at every moment and in every situation, it can get teachers and students closer to that goal:

But it does give us tools for participating in fulfilling the vision of holistic education, an education in which the needs of each child are cherished and in which children are nurtured to act in joy, compassion, and mutuality. We live this vision by creating communities in which all of our needs are seen as beautiful expressions of our humanity—and in which we work toward meeting all of our needs peacefully. As we do so, we create, in a microcosm, the world we dream of bequeathing to our children. (p. 35)

NVC requires a great deal of unlearning, especially on the part of adults, because we have already established our ways of communicating and relating to others, especially in the role of educator to students, but once implemented and practiced, like meditation, it

can provide a glimpse into how to create a peaceful community where all participants are valued equally, where everyone's needs are understood and appreciated, even if at specific instances not all needs may be met. Ultimately, the practices of meditation and NVC work in tandem to create an egalitarian, peaceful, and fulfilling education.

### **Lessons Learned**

Early in my teaching career, I was advised to steal everything. My mentor was not referring to office supplies or books, but rather, she suggested that I learn as much as I could from the teachers around me, and ask them for their lesson plans, curricula, and assignments. The best teachers, she explained, steal ideas and practices from others and make the best ones fit their own needs, values and style. In researching this chapter, I recognize that I do not need to reinvent the wheel, but rather, I can use the practices that others have found successful and fulfill my values and vision of education, and I can implement them in ways that suit my needs and the needs of my students.

Before I began this program, I had no understanding, experience, or knowledge about democratic education, and even after all of my coursework, I still felt uncertain as to what a democratic education entailed. Now I can recognize that schools may identify themselves as democratic based on a variety of factors. Some democratic schools are also called "Free Schools" because students are free to decide what to study, how, and when. Other democratic schools are more traditional, where students are required to take specific courses, and the teachers tend to determine the curriculum, but students play an active role in school governance. There is also a middle ground of democratic schools, where students enroll in required courses, but they work in conjunction with the teacher

to determine the content of their study. Assessments in democratic schools are rarely standardized tests, but rather tend to be portfolios, presentations, or projects, and students play a vital role in assessing their own learning. When I started this program, although I knew that I wanted to create an alternative school that offered students some voice in their education, I hadn't considered democratic education as a vital component of my vision, but as I read and considered the impact of such an education, it has become a foundational value that I hold dear and plan to incorporate in an alternative school that truly offers students an alternative to public school.

Like many public school graduates, I often wondered why I needed to learn content that felt irrelevant. I hadn't chosen what I wanted to learn, and I had very little firsthand of authentic learning in school. I hadn't considered that this need not be the case until I saw for myself how the lack of authentic learning impacts some students much more profoundly than others. I knew the drill: you learn the material so you can succeed on tests, earn good grades, get into a good college, and get a good, middle-class job. I didn't imagine that school had more value than setting you on the path to a middle-class life because I can recall little of what I learned in school beyond the basics, and some projects that stood out as particularly interesting and educational. In fact, one of the most profound lessons that I learned in school was extremely demoralizing. I was struggling to understand some physics concept, and I couldn't complete the homework. I called a friend of mine, who was tracked into lower-level classes than I, but she seemed to be doing well in physics, so I asked her for help. She suggested that I was thinking too hard. "Stop thinking," she told me, "and just plug in the numbers." I followed her advice and

my grades improved, but I felt depressed and frustrated because I felt like a failure. I didn't gain understanding; I just knew how to blindly follow formulae. However, after my coursework, my research, and my teaching experience, I can recognize that if adults do not provide an authentic education to children, then we are not providing much of an education at all, other than that same standard, though uncertain lesson: work hard, get good grades, and ultimately, you will have a decent life. Educators can provide authentic learning opportunities, even within the limitations of standardized curriculum, but in order to do so, they need to balance the needs of the students with the expectations and standards of the curriculum. Finding this balance takes great effort, time, and give and take on the parts of all involved: administrators, teachers, and students, but it can be done, and if educators want to reach all their students, it must be done. An authentic education serves students in terms of meeting their needs in the present moment, and additionally it prepares them to be active, thoughtful participants in the democracy that they help create.

Furthermore, an authentic education must acknowledge the complex reality of the United States. In order to provide an authentic education, teachers must incorporate the experiences, values, and history of the diverse people who live here. Even if the student body is predominantly White, incorporating Black, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian history in the United States would provide them with a more authentic and profound understanding of who we are as a nation, and would serve to reveal how systems of inequality serve to privilege some at the expense of others. For this reason, all schools

that strive to create a better, stronger, more united nation should incorporate multicultural education.

I knew little about social justice education before my doctoral coursework, and even after my coursework, I had little information regarding how to implement it, or what programs and experiences other schools have already initiated. However, when I saw that social justice education was possible, that some schools actively incorporate it, and that it impacted students profoundly, I knew that including social justice was key to creating an education that feels authentic to a wide range of students, teaches democracy in a way that empowers students to participate actively in their communities and schools, and helps students recognize their place in the nation. One of my former students told me that his civics teacher told him that patriotism means supporting the government, but I would argue that patriotism is much more active and involved than that. Patriotism, from my perspective, means participating actively to make this country more just, more democratic, and more peaceful. A social justice education empowers young people to work for such changes, and so will serve beneficial to students while simultaneously promoting the ideals that this nation was founded upon.

Finally, incorporating practices that can serve to teach students how to find peace within themselves, and how to engage in conflict peacefully is of major importance to me. Offering spirit-learning tools will help prepare students to create a peaceful society. Currently, such practices are rarely offered as part of education, and this absence is obvious. Our culture is violent, and I believe that it is completely appropriate and important to provide an education for children that challenges the notion that “might

makes right,” or that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict. Teaching peace can touch young people’s spirits, and help them realize their deepest needs for security and self-worth, as well as their ability to connect deeply with others.

## CHAPTER VI

### A VISION FOR A PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE

#### **The Problem with the Status Quo**

I am in a complicated, contradictory place regarding public schools. I absolutely support public schools, and it troubles me deeply when I see them being undermined, underfunded, or closed down by politicians who claim that schools are failing. I feel strongly that neoliberalist practices are serving to destabilize an important institution that, flawed as it is, provides students with the possibility of improving their economic condition, and often offers them an opportunity to build caring relationships with adults who inspire them in a variety of ways: academically, creatively, and emotionally. The majority of public school educators care deeply about their students and also about the content that they teach, and they sincerely want the best for their pupils, even when they may struggle to understand them and serve them successfully.

At the same time, I am deeply troubled by the direction I see public schools taking as neoliberalist policies are being implemented. Although the Common Core State Standards initiative seems reasonable at first glance, for example, when examined more closely they reveal some troubling practices. Public schools in 45 states are implementing a curriculum that has not been created by teachers, but rather by politicians and Achieve, a private consulting firm, and has been funded primarily by the Gates Foundation (Karp, p. 14). Bill Gates, founder of the Gates Foundation, will benefit from

the initiative because the assessments require schools to have the most up-to-date operating systems on their computers, which will force many school systems around the nation to spend quite a bit of money that will benefit the Microsoft Corporation. This initiative has not been field tested, but rather has been imposed on schools as a way of receiving federal funding (Karp, p. 14). While states could refuse to implement the initiative and still receive federal funding, they have to create their own policies and procedures that mirror that of the Common Core to do so.

My primary area of concern about the Common Core State Standards initiative regards standardized testing. Students take a disturbing number of standardized tests every year, and teachers are pressured to spend class time preparing students to succeed on the tests through drills, practice tests, and “item analysis,” which involves students identifying the skills being tested on each question that they answered incorrectly so that they can focus their attention on learning that precise skill. While they are concentrating so much time and energy on test preparation, students are not learning content. Rather, they are learning testing. Furthermore, despite the fact that the tests are not created for such purposes, students’ scores on standardized tests are used to evaluate teachers. Not only is such a practice unfair, but ultimately it hurts both the children and their teachers, while simultaneously diminishing the purpose of education. Teachers learn to view their students as test scores, and start to feel wary of teaching children who struggle on standardized tests, though those children need their teachers’ care and attention the most. Children learn to identify themselves as smart or dumb, based on their success on these tests, regardless of the fact that there are multiple ways of being intelligent. Only a

limited type of intelligence is assessed, and with standardized tests, students who may grasp the material but do not test well will be assessed inaccurately. The purpose of education is not to create good test takers, but rather to educate the children so that they love learning and can continue to learn beyond the classroom. I want my students to love reading, even if they misidentify the main idea of a passage on a test. If they learn that they are always wrong, they will learn that reading is not for them.

I also feel that the practice of using standardized testing to evaluate teachers diminishes the value of teaching. Educators do so much more than teach content. They buy clothes, books, and gifts for their students. They comfort and advise students who feel that they can't talk to anyone else. They find resources for students whose families can't afford medical, dental, and vision care. They encourage and challenge their students to try new things, and take on new challenges. They inspire students. The impact a teacher has on any given student is immeasurable, and additionally, may not be immediate. The teacher herself may be unaware of her influence on a child's life because the child may not appreciate the impact of a powerful teacher until years after sitting in her classroom. Education is not a business, but when business practices and values, like competition, hierarchical power, and an overreliance on measurable data become accepted elements of education, then the ability of teachers to be impactful is diminished.

As Ravitch (2010) explains:

Those who are motivated by idealism, autonomy, and a sense of purpose actually perform better and work harder than those who hope for a bonus or fear being fired. Relying on extrinsic motivation... may actually hinder improvement, because people will work to make the target yet will lose sight of their goals as professionals. The essence of professionalism is autonomy, the freedom to make

decisions based on one's knowledge and experience.... Carrots and sticks are for donkeys, not for professionals. (p. 259)

For this reason, I believe that it is time for teachers and others who care about education to create their own vision, based on their values and beliefs. While business currently seems to be winning in education's "Race to the Top," educators should create our own metaphors and models for education based on our hopes for our students' future.

Although the current political climate is not particularly open to experimentation in education, many groups and individuals are pushing back against neoliberalist policies that determine educational practices. While attempting to open an alternative school that does not include standardized testing or Common Core Curriculum seems unlikely to occur in today's environment, I believe that firstly, this climate will change as more people start to see the impact of these practices, and secondly, there are ways to work around such a closed climate. For example, instead of identifying as a school, perhaps alternatives could identify themselves as home schooling resource centers, or education centers. Creating progressive alternatives in today's climate will be much more challenging than it was in a more innovative and experimental atmosphere like that of the 1960s. For starters, our current system demands that schools participate in standardized exams in order to get accredited as a school. Secondly, with such a competitive climate, especially in terms of higher education, creating alternatives that don't employ traditional grading practices will not likely be well-received by many parents who hope that their children go on to college. Because parents want their children to have the best opportunities for a successful future, they likely will be less likely to take the risk of

sending their children to a school with practices that are so far afield from the more traditional, neoliberalist practices that are found in most public schools.

While I strongly believe that educators are not to blame for the current state of our school system, and the system is set up to be impervious to progressive challenges, I do think that educators have a role to play in confronting neoliberalist practices that are forced upon them and their students. The act of envisioning and creating progressive alternatives reveals cracks in the school walls by providing insight into the ways public schools might better serve all students. Just because the walls look impenetrable, because change looks impossible, does not make it so. Educators who believe that learning can make the world a better place, and those who believe in the value of a democratic education can work to hammer down the walls that neoliberalism has built, and let a more organic, impactful, just, and inclusive system emerge.

At the same time, as much as I want public education to be successful, I feel pained to see that public schools are not serving all of our students equitably. Test scores, drop-out rates, suspension and expulsion rates, and graduation rates reveal that students of color and students from families of a low socio-economic status do not share the same experiences or successes as their White and/or wealthier classmates (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.; Noguera, xvii). Statistics reveal a fundamental gap in the benefit of public education, and I wish that rather than blaming and shaming students and their families, rather than implementing more of the same education policies and practices, instead teachers, administrators, and policy-makers would consider alternative practices that might better serve all students in our schools.

My desire to reach all students equitably inspired me to look more deeply at our public school system and to consider an alternative that I hope would offer a powerful, profound, and empowering education for all students.

### **Bringing it all Together**

I started my dissertation knowing that elements of public school troubled me, but I couldn't put my finger on precisely what the problem was. I knew, for example, that I didn't like the endless standardized testing, but I didn't understand that the practice was part of a neoliberalist policy that would serve to provide corporate interests with the power to control public education (Baltadano, p. 493). I knew that students found the curriculum in many classes to be irrelevant to their lives, but I didn't understand why teachers and schools continued to implement "new" curricula that didn't seem much different than the old curricula.

I also started this dissertation knowing that there are certain elements that I'd like to see at a school that aims to reach all students in a way that is simultaneously engaging and empowering. For example, I knew that I wanted to provide an education that incorporates physical nourishment and activity through the establishment of an edible schoolyard and martial arts training. I knew that I wanted to include elements of a spiritual education through the practice of meditation. I also already knew that I wanted to involve students' families and communities, and I wanted all the stakeholders to have a voice in making important decisions. Finally, I knew that I wanted to provide an education that focused on social justice and multiculturalism. While I could identify what I wanted students, teachers, and the community to do in regards to educating

children, I struggled to distinguish why. I simply thought they were good ideas; I thought young people would enjoy this type of education, and I also thought that such an education might help plant some seeds in terms of inspiring students to become empowered to make changes in the world around them. I didn't realize that my ideas are not new, but rather fall in line with a tradition of educational philosophers who view education as key to maintaining and improving our democracy.

I had heard of Dewey, I knew of the Highlander School, I had done some research previously on the Modern School, and I also knew a little bit about the Mexican-American Studies program in Tucson, but I was unaware of the rich history of educational philosophers who considered education to be a vital component to maintaining and strengthening our democracy, and I also hadn't considered how these bits and pieces that I knew about fit together in a U.S. American tradition of democratic education. I didn't even know that there was a history of democratic education; I simply knew of some scattered handful of educational experiments that seemed disconnected from one another.

### **Democratic Education**

Now, however, not only do I recognize that a history of democratic education exists, but I wish I had learned of it earlier. In fact, I wish all teachers knew about this history because I think that if more educators were aware of the history of democratic education, then they would be more likely to question the policies and practices that we implement in public schools now. With an awareness of the history of democratic education, teachers would be better prepared to determine if our educational policies and

practices move our society towards a stronger democracy, or towards an authoritarian and undemocratic style of governance. As long ago as 1897, Dewey proclaimed, “To prepare him [the child] for the future life means to give him command of himself” (pp. 21-22). He wasn’t arguing that preparing children for the future meant that adults needed to coerce children into learning material that adults valued; nor was he suggesting that teachers needed to focus on classroom management, which is another way of saying controlling the behavior of children so that they are all paying attention to the teachers’ instruction and/or lecture. Rather, Dewey suggests:

Since education is not a means to living, but is identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant, the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself. And this is not an end to which studies and activities are subordinate means; it is the whole of which they are ingredients. (p. 281)

His argument is that the purpose of education should not be to produce good workers or ensure future employment, but rather, education is life; learning is part and parcel of living a life that is “fruitful and inherently significant,” (Dewey, p. 281) in and of itself, and need not serve any other purpose. Rather than focusing on the content that students learn, I believe Dewey is suggesting that educators concern themselves with teaching students to love learning, and to view learning as a valuable skill available to all children.

Theorists and educators interpret democratic education in a variety of ways, and there is a wide diversity in terms of how much power and freedom students should have in their education, ranging from free schools like the Modern School in the first half of the last century (Ferrer, 1913), to schools that have set courses and requirements, but

include students in all areas of school governance, like the Central Park East Secondary Schools (Meier, pp. 58-59). What democratic schools have in common, however, is the belief that in order to prepare young people to participate in democracy, they need to have the opportunity to make big decisions about important topics, like their education.

When I began envisioning an ideal school, while I wanted students and families to play an important role in school decision-making, I didn't realize that such a tradition existed, and I hadn't recognized that my idea springs from a belief in the value of democracy. I simply saw that few of the people in schools, adults and students alike, have much power over the education that is being offered. As stated before, teachers had no input into the creation of the Common Core State Standards initiative, and also had no power to decide whether or not the state adopted the initiative (Karp, p. 14); rather teachers were told by administrators, who also had no input in the decision, that this was the new curriculum, and that we must prepare students for the new assessments without much knowledge about the assessments ourselves. Still, educators and administrators will be held accountable for the results of the standardized assessments. Such practices go against the idea of democratic education, since none of the most impacted stakeholders (teachers, students, administrators, or parents) had input into the creation of the curriculum, nor did they have a voice in whether or not they chose to implement the new initiative.

### **The Importance of Authenticity**

The more I read about democratic education, the more I felt that certain practices and courses would serve to establish a strong basis for a sound, authentic, engaging

education. Specifically, in order for education to promote democracy, students would need to feel that what they are learning is relevant to their lives. Without authenticity, education becomes a practice of submission to adults' perception of what is relevant to children. As Freire (2006) explains, "...To alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (p. 85). This is not to say that adults have nothing to say about what children need to learn in order to be prepared for an uncertain future, but rather, that adults and young people need to collaborate in order to establish an education that inspires both groups, and feels valuable and relevant to both.

Because students at a democratic school will have some power and authority to determine their own learning, authentic learning will be part and parcel with the school. Teachers and students will learn together how to create more democracy in their classrooms and in their schools, and because the students will have a voice in the creation of the curriculum, practices, and policies of the school, they will be working actively to building an authentic learning environment. Students will not have to ask why they have to learn material; rather, they will have had some say in determining what they learn. George Counts (1932) explains that the role of educators is to create a better, more just, and more democratic future, and to succeed in such an endeavor requires establishing a more authentic vision of the role of education than the one that operates currently.

To refuse to fact the task of creating a vision of a future America immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the America of today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task....Only when we have fashioned a finer and more authentic vision than they [conservative forces] will we be fully justified in our opposition to their efforts. (p. 55)

To “fashion a finer and more authentic vision” (Counts, p. 55) of education than the vision policy-makers and legislators have created, educators need to listen to students and their communities rather than to bureaucrats in far-away offices. An authentic vision of education demands that the content to be learned is relevant to students’ lives, and that students recognize the value of learning the material. I think that when educators strive to create a more authentic learning environment for children, the community will support them with energy and enthusiasm.

In the Hawaiian Studies Program, for example, educators found that connecting students with the community outside of school helped young people to recognize the importance of their education. Students learn to recognize that the values held inside the school do not vary so much from the values that their community holds dear. Not only does such connection help the students, but having close ties with families can help the families as well. As the school community begins to feel connected through shared goals and visions for children’s future, the school community comes to support each other in many ways.

I believe that for learning to be authentic, it must engage the child, her family, and the community. When students can see all these people taking an interest in their education, and when they have had some input into their education themselves, students can’t help but feel more invested, more interested, and even more responsible for their education. They will understand that their education impacts so many other people in their communities, and they will recognize that so many people value their education.

Through caring about their education, adults share their caring for the children and the future.

### **Multicultural Education**

In order for education to be both democratic and authentic, teachers must help students to recognize how complex our society really is. The United States is not simply a melting pot where all ethnic groups melt and converge into one unified experience and identity. A better metaphor is a mixed salad: many ingredients mix together and simultaneously maintain their distinct cultures and values while creating a nutritious, rich diversity of flavors, all of which contribute to the quality of the entire salad. Gisa Kirsch (1999) explains:

If we are to continue to live together peacefully in a multicultural society, we need to collaborate and learn from those who have been constructed as "others" in this culture so that we can work toward a more just and truly democratic society. (p. 64)

I feel that we cannot actually “continue” to live together peacefully in a multicultural society, because I don’t feel that we currently live together peacefully in a multicultural society. I believe that the “peace” that we experience is superficial. While we don’t presently experience the race riots of the Civil Rights movement, and we have made some progress in terms of race relations, power, and equity, I don’t think we can say that we are a peaceful society until everyone has equal opportunity, equal privileges, and equal voice. The apparent calm that we may feel now is a superficial quiet, like a relationship where the partners don’t fight, but they also don’t discuss problems that simmer under the surface of their peaceful façade.

Although I have experienced the discomfort of difficult conversations about race, I feel certain that in order to experience a true peace, an authentic, life-sustaining peace, we need to continue to have difficult conversations in order to grow in our ability to understand and feel compassion for one another's struggles, and we can make our democratic practices and decisions stronger when we struggle together to understand one another's experiences. Neil Postman (1995) explains: "...What "multiculturalism" aims at is not reconciliation with Eurocentric history and learning, but a thorough rejection of it so that a new beginning may be made, a new narrative constructed" (p. 53). Although he later argues that multiculturalism in this way will not work because the public would not support a program that would be so far removed from the myths of the country that many of the majority hold dear, he suggests that if educators reframe the purpose of schooling as a place to wrestle with ideas, and if we view our national heritage and history as one of experiments and arguments, then a multicultural education will aid in creating a more accurate and thorough understanding of our society.

There's the rub, and the beauty and the value of the story. So we argue and experiment and complain, and grieve, and rejoice, and argue some more, without end.... All is fluid and subject to change, to better arguments, to the results of future experiments. This... is a fine and noble story to offer as a reason for schooling: to provide our youth with the knowledge and will to participate in the great experiment; to teach them how to argue, and to help them discover what questions are worth arguing about; and, of course, to make sure they know what happens when arguments cease.... The only thing we have to fear is that someone will insist on putting in an exclamation point when we are not yet finished. (pp. 73-74)

Rather than teaching U.S. history as a chronology of wars and political leaders, educators could focus instead on the issues about which conflicts occur. Teachers should help

students find their own place in “the great experiment,” and teach them “how to argue” while also helping them to “discover what questions are worth arguing about” (Postman, pp. 73-74). Rather than teaching history as linear and finished, he suggests that engaged citizens recognize the impact and role history has in today’s issues, and educators need to show students that history is not “an exclamation point,” (Postman, p. 74) but rather flows into the present, impacting our perspectives and experiences today. History should not be taught solely from the perspective of those in power, but rather should be taught from a variety of perspectives, revealing the debates and struggles that challenge students to wrestle with the ideas and stories that are used to define us.

Although I feel strongly that multicultural studies should be an integral part of a democratic school, I must admit that I felt a bit nervous to hear my participants’ opinions about it. I expected that they would think it would sound boring, too much like a typical class, sitting, possibly taking notes, reading, but I was surprised by their responses.

Maria: That’d be good.

John: It sounds like a good idea.

LeLe: We might be interested in it.

Me: What? [I was surprised because this was the first thing LeLe responded to so positively.]

LeLe: You might be interested in it, like instead of going to sleep all the time.

However, Joaquin expressed reluctance. “The thing is, um, some kids are more embarrassed about it, you know what I mean?” Later, he added, “But there’s only so

much each ethnicity group has to offer [how much he has to learn!]. Like you could put, you know what I mean? You couldn't do a full course on it.”

Joaquin repeatedly revealed a strong ambivalence about his own heritage, and his apparent disconnection from his roots troubled me. When he revealed that some students would be embarrassed about their ethnicity, and that there's only so much students could learn from studying diverse ethnicities, I felt pained, and my sense of the need to teach multiculturalism in school strengthened. Valenzuela (1999) argues that authentic relationships in school are challenging to establish when the curriculum does not address the experiences and history of the ethnicities of the students:

Less obvious to caring theorists are the racist and authoritarian undertones that accompany the demand that youth... "care about" school. The overt request overlies a covert demand that students embrace a curriculum that either dismisses or derogates their ethnicity and that they respond caringly to school officials who often hold their culture and community in contempt. (pp. 24-25)

In order to show that we value all of the students in our classrooms, teachers need to learn and teach the stories, contributions, and struggles of all U.S. Americans as best as possible. When educators dismiss the contributions of cultures that are represented not just in their classrooms, but in the nation, we teach children that some cultures are more valid, more important, and more worthy of our time and attention. Doing this diminishes the humanity of the groups that we deem less important, and such practice teaches some students that their culture is “embarrassing,” or that there just isn't that much that they need to know about their heritage. If, instead, teachers incorporated the values and history of Latino/as, for example, Joaquin would be more likely to recognize his culture

as rich, and the struggles of his ancestors as his own. He could learn to take pride in their contributions, and could gain strength and wisdom from his cultural inheritance.

During our first interview, he said that because he was one of few “Spanish” students in his elementary school, and often the only one in his advanced classes, he felt as if he stood out, and suggested that it might have caused some of the teasing that he experienced in school. During our second interview, I asked him to elaborate, and he acknowledged that he may have misinterpreted the alienation that he felt as the only “Spanish” student:

In the private school was all White; I was the only Spanish. They weren’t, I guess, that, I guess I’m just like, it seems more, I don’t, I’d always, I’d always been able to blame it on like, race. I guess it had a little more to do with the Asperger’s, too, because of how that made me behave, how I acted because of it. You know what I mean? Because I was always, I was the weird one. I guess maybe that helped a bit too with it.

He said that students always knew he was “Spanish,” and when they met his parents, “That really sealed the deal,” because his parents both have dark skin, darker than his own skin, and they speak with an accent, but he often talked about how he doesn’t feel connected to his heritage: “I don’t like, I don’t listen to Spanish music, I don’t speak Spanish, I’m pretty much just in blood. That’s pretty much it.” During our focus group, when I asked students how they would feel about learning about their ethnic backgrounds, he suggested that students might be “embarrassed” about that. In our third interview, I asked him to elaborate. We were in his house, and his mother was in the kitchen, so although I felt he was talking about himself since he had mentioned his own

ambivalence towards his heritage, he used an example that he saw as parallel that wouldn't alert his mother:

Joaquin: The biggest thing is like, um, hm, like Muslim culture, is like really frowned upon in America because of like, the 9/11 and all that. Like I see on TV shows, like they always have like, they do the culture [inaudible] then someone spray paints "terrorist" all over it.

Me: Right, yeah. Ok. So, would that make someone not want to study their culture, do you think?

Joaquin: They might want to know about it, but like, if say, you take the class for your culture, then you go in there, then everyone's gonna know what you are. Some people might not want that.

Joaquin's reaction is precisely why I feel an urgent need to incorporate multicultural studies in my educational program. When young people lack appreciation for the richness of their heritage, then they grow up feeling alienated and embarrassed from an important element of their identity and culture. Denying or ignoring culture diminishes both the individuals from that culture, but also diminishes the United States as a country where people from diverse cultures learn to live together. When we can appreciate the richness that the intermingling of cultures provides, rather than view one another through the lens of judgment, envy, and mistrust, as a nation we can be more vibrant and open to learning from one another's strengths. Ethnic studies can teach young people to feel pride in the role that people like them had in shaping a more equitable nation, and can also teach students to feel solidarity with people who may appear different from them, but share in similar struggles.

My intention in including multicultural studies is not simply so students enjoy learning, however. A larger goal is that students feel connected to their communities, and empowered, as well as inspired to work towards creating a more just society. As James Banks (1991) suggests:

The key goal of the multicultural curriculum should be to help students develop decision-making and citizen-action skills. The decision-making process consists of several components, including knowledge, values, the synthesis of knowledge and values, and action designed to implement the decision made. However, the knowledge that comprises reflective decision making must have certain characteristics. It must be scientific, higher level, conceptual, and interdisciplinary. Reflective decision makers must identify the sources of their values, determine how these values conflict, identify value alternatives, and choose freely from among the alternatives. They act only after identifying alternative courses of action, ordering them according to personal values, and expressing a willingness to accept the possible consequences of their actions. (p. 34)

My hope is that students will see that people in their community value and participate in the education that the school provides, and so these young people will also grow to value learning. Students will see that every culture values learning. Every community has fought, and continues to fight for a decent, relevant education for their youth, and by recognizing the struggles of those who came before, students may come to appreciate education and success as part of their cultural heritage and a cultural value from their own heritage as well. When education becomes more than “playing the game,” more than standardized test preparation, and instead touches students’ spirits by incorporating their community, their history, and their values, then they will be more likely to be willing to struggle to experience success, in whatever form that may look like.

One way that a school could implement a multicultural curriculum would be to incorporate the stories, perspectives, and experiences of a diversity of groups within traditional classes. History and literature classes could rather easily include the experiences and writings of African-Americans, Latina/os, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and any other immigrant groups, especially as they reflect the population of the student body. However, even if the student population is predominantly White, including other ethnic groups' history, culture, and literature will serve to enrich their understanding of the diversity of the U.S., and help them to understand how privilege serves to maintain the power of the powerful at someone else's expense. Multicultural education will allow students to engage in relevant learning, while at the same time enhance their understanding of who we are as a nation. With this knowledge, students will be better prepared to make decisions in a way that takes into consideration the impact of their decisions on people who may not share their experiences, history, values, and culture, but who, nevertheless, also are vital contributors to our shared nation. For this reason, I believe that providing a democratic education requires teachers to simultaneously provide a multicultural education.

### **Social Justice Education**

I think my interest in social justice started when I was eight years old, when I was on a field trip to Philadelphia, and I saw a homeless man lying on the sidewalk. Later in the evening, I asked my mother why someone would sleep outside like that. She explained that he was homeless, and I asked her if we couldn't let him sleep in our guest room. He needed a place to sleep, and we had an extra room; it seemed only logical.

That night a storm kept me from sleeping, and I thought again about the man I saw. I couldn't understand why his life looked so public and uncomfortable while I had my own, private bedroom with a TV. I didn't do anything to be so lucky, and I didn't think anyone deserved to be so unlucky as to have to have nowhere private, warm, and dry to go in a rainstorm. That experience had a profound impact on me, and my desire to try to make life fairer for everyone has never left me.

I mention this story because in my application to this program, I remembered this man, and I wrote about how despite the fact that my life experiences probably should have taught me better, I am still an idealist at heart. I still believe that our society could better serve everyone, and I further believe that everyone suffers in an unjust society and world. Injustice diminishes the humanity of both the privileged and those who lack privilege. However, homelessness, poverty, racism, and other social justice issues were never addressed in my education: not in public school nor in college; not in my BA in Psychology program, nor my MA in English.

Bringing social justice into education can transform the world profoundly, and I believe it will help young people to recognize a responsibility that we all have to take care of one another. Shapiro (2006) explains:

It is time to begin a new era of educational thinking, one that starts with rethinking the vision of what it means for our children to become educated in a time of profound economic, technological, cultural, and moral [and, I would add, environmental] change. Such a vision needs to connect education to our hopes for our children's lives in the context of a world in which the present often seems menacing, and the future precarious. Our vision will have to connect education's work to our best hopes for what it means to be human and how we might live with others both within our own nation as well as in the larger world. In this new bold

assertion of education's mission, questions of identity, culture, and ethical commitment are integral to our educational concerns, and explicitly stated. (p. 16)

Social justice education shows students that they can take action that may improve their own lives as well as that of others, and it seems particularly urgent now, as the gap grows between “the rich and the rest of us,” as Cornell West and Tavis Smiley (2012) aptly describe the income inequality, not just in our nation, but in our world, and as the environmental degradation caused by wealthier nations threatens the very existence of poorer island nations, while causing war and violence in other countries where people are fighting desperately for resources like food and water. Illich (1971) argues:

The struggle against domination by the world market and big-power politics might be beyond some poor communities or countries, but this weakness is an added reason for emphasizing the importance of liberating each society through a reversal of its educational structure, a change which is not beyond any society's means. (p. 75)

If adults provide social justice education, if we teach children to work against market and political forces, then we can feed hope for a peaceful, sustainable, just future even when it seems like an idealist's dream today. If we do not offer social justice education, on the other hand, then hoping for a just future will remain a dream.

### **Spirituality/Peace Education**

One primary innovation in the progressive alternative that I envision involves implementing practices that teach students and teachers how to be peaceful. From my perspective, the ultimate goal of social justice education is peace; social justice education should inspire students to work towards creating a more peaceful society. However, I

also believe that we cannot create a peaceful society solely by creating a just society. Peace must be taught, and it must be taught in a powerful, personal way that helps students understand why peace is valuable and why it is preferable to war or violence. Students and adults alike need to experience peace in order to recognize that physical strength or military might cannot bring about a true or deep understanding of the power of peace. Rather, the peace that is experienced from within, the peace that moves spirits to a place of quiet strength and resiliency is deeply powerful, and transforms those who share that practice. Peace is a practice, and so if adults want to create a more peaceful future, we need to provide young people with opportunities to practice peace. Additionally, we need to provide young people with tools to practice resolving differences peacefully. Clearly, practicing peace and peaceful communication can go a long way to creating more peaceful communities, societies, and eventually to a more peaceful world.

**Meditation.** One of the primary spiritual struggles that I have been weighing as I envision a school that encourages students to create a better world relates to my desire to focus so heavily on social justice struggles. Although I was raised Jewish, as an adult, I have been practicing Buddhist meditation for about ten years, and my practice has led me to consider how to balance political activism with the Buddhist value of spiritual peace. At nearly every Buddhist retreat, at every opportunity, I ask teachers, “How can I be at peace in a world that is so unjust and so violent?” Injustice makes me angry. When I see children or adults act cruelly, my habitual response is to feel a range of emotions from frustration, to anger, to rage. When I go to political protests or anti-war marches, I am

simultaneously exhilarated from the sense of solidarity with others with whom I stand, and fury at those whom I feel have pushed me to raise my fist in protest. Generally, Buddhist teachers tell me to look deeply into my anger, and to recognize that it stems from a lack of understanding, but still, at this stage in my practice, I do not understand. I am still angry. Although I can see better that injustice results from the lack of understanding on the part of the person or people who behave in unjust ways, I do not yet feel peaceful, calm, and compassionate when I see such behavior. Eckhart Tolle (1999) addresses this struggle directly:

If you feel called upon to alleviate suffering in the world, that is a very noble thing to do, but remember not to focus exclusively on the outer; otherwise, you will encounter frustration and despair. Without a profound change in human consciousness, the world's suffering is a bottomless pit.... Let your peace flow into whatever you do and you will be working on the levels of effect and cause simultaneously. This also applies if you are supporting a movement designed to stop deeply unconscious humans from destroying themselves, each other, and the planet, or from continuing to inflict dreadful suffering on other sentient beings. Remember: Just as you cannot fight the darkness, so you cannot fight unconsciousness. If you try to do so, the polar opposites will become strengthened and more deeply entrenched. You will become identified with one of the polarities, you will create an "enemy," and so be drawn into unconsciousness yourself. Raise awareness by disseminating information... But make sure that you carry no resistance within, no hatred, no negativity. "Love your enemies," said Jesus, which, of course, means "have no enemies." Once you get involved in working on the level of effect, it is all too easy to lose yourself in it.... The causal level needs to remain your primary focus, the teaching of enlightenment your main purpose, and peace your most precious gift to the world. (pp. 203-204)

Through my readings and discussions, I feel urged, pushed, and inspired to take a stand, and I stand proudly with those who fight for peace and justice, but at the same time, I feel aware that fighting for peace sounds, and is, illogical. If I want to see peace in the world,

as a teacher and as a Buddhist (or JewBu, or Buddhish?), then I must learn to be peaceful myself. Being peaceful does not come naturally or intuitively. Peace is a practice; it requires practice. Having an enemy, a sense of moral indignation, a certainty of being right feels easy and natural in comparison.

Although I am wary of teaching Buddhism explicitly in a school that aims to reach students' spirits, I feel strongly that for students and adults alike, studying peace, literally, personally, and spiritually is vital. Just as fighting wars for the sake of peace sounds absurd, fighting injustice as a "fight" seems inevitably fated to failure; we're perpetuating, perhaps not a war, but another fight. While I realize that appealing to the better nature of humanity may be a slow, arduous process, I also feel that imposing one's will, regardless of good and ethical intentions, ultimately will fail to bring authentic transformation of society, our ideals and values.

For this reason, I feel strongly that teaching meditation and nonviolent communication are vital components of teaching peace. Because meditation is a practice of being aware in the present moment, practitioners learn two simultaneous lessons: first, meditators learn to recognize their habitual mental patterns, including what inspires anger, boredom, frustration, and what messages they tell themselves about their patterns (you're bad, this always happens to me, etc.), and secondly, meditators learn how to let go, if even for a moment, of thoughts in favor of recognizing and finding peace in the present moment.

Precisely because of the personal impact that I can see in my own life that meditation has had on my ability to experience peace, both within and with others, I feel

strongly that teaching meditation to young people, as well as not-so-young people, will have as great an effect, if not greater, on creating a more just, peaceful, and loving society as the wisdom and understanding than comes from a more traditional education, even one that focuses on democratic education, authentic learning, social justice and multicultural studies. When studied together, I can't help but feel certain that many lives will be impacted in powerful, positive, and peaceful ways.

**Nonviolent communication.** When I started teaching in public school, I was surprised to see how difficult it seemed to be for students to get along with one another. The primary reason for classroom distractions and disruptions, other than boredom, was conflict. Although some of the schools where I have taught have mediators or guidance counselors to help students to work through such conflicts, the same children seem to engage in tense clashes repeatedly, and they do not seem to learn effective ways to communicate nonviolently. Conflict is a challenging, important aspect of learning about one's identity, and everyone can benefit from learning how to engage in conflict nonviolently, including in the use of language. If people can learn how to speak nonviolently even when expressing disagreement or unhappiness, we can prevent physical violence from erupting.

Incorporating peace study in a way that provides students and the school community to actually experience a sense of peace complements the larger goals and values of a democratic, multicultural, social justice oriented school. Democracy is messy, and the learning that takes place in a democratic school, if it is to be truly democratic, is bound to occur with some conflict. Sharing power with students, working

as groups, learning about power and privilege all can lead to arguments, hurt feelings, and tensions. Rather than “protect” students from conflicts, or ignore problems, however, a school that provides an authentic education must offer the opportunity for the community to address and try to resolve the conflict, and the school community must also have some guidelines so that the conflict can occur in a safe, respectful, and life-sustaining manner.

In order to teach NVC to students, adults have to be willing and able to engage in an honest and vulnerable way with students. Like any practice that we hope to teach young people, we have to model the expected behavior. Currently, when teachers and students engage in conflict, generally the greater power of the adult diminishes the young person, and creates an unbalanced power dynamic. However, if the adults use NVC then teachers can learn to listen for students’ feelings and needs, identify what needs are not being met, and work together to come to some resolution regarding how to meet both the student’s and the adult’s needs. NVC fits in with a democratic education because it provides a way to communicate that honors one another’s needs and feelings, regardless of one another’s personal status, power, class, race, etc. The needs of the adults are no more or no less important than the needs of the students, and each person participating in a nonviolent communication exchange has an opportunity to express their feelings as well as their needs, and may make an explicit request that will help ensure that needs get met. When young people feel that others are making an honest effort to meet their needs, they are more likely to be able to reciprocate such effort, and strive to help other peers and adults meet their needs as well. Not only will such form of communication help to build

a strong community within a democratic school, but it will also help young people learn how to deal with conflict in a more positive, life-sustaining way outside of school.

Although U.S. American culture has plenty of models of violent communication, where threats, coercion, and other forms of showing power over others dominate, NVC offers an alternative model which, with practice could help in work to create a more socially just, peaceful society.

### **Additional Considerations**

In addition to the practices addressed previously, I envision an alternative school that establishes an edible schoolyard, teaches martial arts, provides a curriculum that incorporates traditional subjects, such as math, science, language arts, social studies, other arts as desired by students, and offers some sort of work-study, apprenticeship, or volunteer opportunities. Although on the one hand the curriculum will appear similar to that of traditional schools, on the other hand, the way that the content of the courses is determined, the structure of the course, and the assessment of students' learning will look different, based on the needs, interests, and decisions of each class. Rather than offering a syllabus based solely on the teachers' input (or the input of outside interests), classes may begin with a discussion of students' interests and prior knowledge about the subject. Students and teachers will work together to ensure that the material is relevant, and together they can create the curriculum. Perhaps students will work on independent learning, where the teacher acts more like a research advisor to students who do the work and then present what they've learned to the class. Some classes may be project-based, while others may look like workshops, for example. A further expectation that I have for

this alternative is that teachers will collaborate closely with one another, so that the content of one class can enrich the content of another. Ultimately, in order to provide an authentic and democratic education, students and teachers will create classes together, and so content and structure may well vary from one year to the next.

One final possible component of this alternative education is to offer students the opportunity to prepare for the GED exam. Because I would not want the alternative I propose to participate in required standardized testing, I expect that such a school would not be accredited in today's climate of accountability and standardization. Therefore, although the alternative that I envision would offer a profound education, students who desire to do so could also earn certification documenting that they have successfully learned the information required of a traditional education. By providing GED preparation courses as a minor component of the alternative school I propose, students could get the certification that they need to open doors in terms of work or furthering their education.

Although initially I envisioned that students at a progressive alternative like the one I envision would be those who are underserved in public school due to institutionalized values and practices that appear irrelevant and at odds with their needs and home culture, I recognize that such students might not be drawn to my school. Based on my interactions in attempting to engage students in my study, I recognize that they may not trust me, and they may not be interested in the values and program that I'd like to implement. It may be the case that the students who are drawn to my school reflect the participants in my study: creative, intelligent, and perhaps in some way not quite

mainstream. Regardless, the education that I hope to offer will still contribute to improving their understanding of the world, and establishing a positive role for themselves in their communities. Any young person would benefit from a democratic, authentic, multicultural, social justice oriented education, but those who would benefit most would be those who choose to be there because they are interested and drawn to such a program.

### **Final Thoughts**

Starting with the end in mind, successful students at a school that implements a democratic, multicultural, and authentic education can also learn practices that will help them to feel peaceful while working to make their communities and society in general more just and equitable. Students will question the status quo and recognize multiple perspectives behind practices, processes, accepted truths, and information that come their way. Successful students will be active citizens in the world who will work in any number of ways to make their communities and society in general more democratic and more peaceful. Successful students will understand that multiple “right” answers exist, and they will know how to evaluate and question the world around them, and finally, students will value the process of learning.

In Parker Palmer’s (1998) *The courage to teach*, he quotes Vaclav Havel, the former President of the Czech Republic:

Havel... writes about spending years "under a rock" of institutional oppression that was dropped on the Czech people in the Communist coup of 1968.... "The... experience I'm talking about has given me one certainty... the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global

revolution in ... human consciousness, nothing will change for the better, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed... will be unavoidable." (p. 20) [speech delivered to joint meeting of the US Congress, quoted in *Time*, Mar 5, 1990, pp. 14-15]

Parker goes on to explain that Havel helped the Czech people by showing them that they need not be the victims of external forces, but rather, they have an inner power which they could use to resist oppression. If adults teach young people to recognize their own inner power, and help them direct their power and strength in positive ways towards a better future of hope, justice, peace, and compassion, then I will see that education as successful.

Although my initial ideas regarding some of the practices and courses that I would like to implement in a democratic school have not changed much through the process of writing, what has changed for me is the profound realization that I am not alone in my thinking, and in my goals for the future. Additionally, some aspects of my vision, such as democratic, multicultural, and social justice education, have become much more important than they were originally, while other aspects that I still feel are important became less prominent. I simply hadn't recognized that my vision was to establish a democratic education for students who might benefit from having more decision-making authority in school. I have discovered what other progressive educators have implemented, both in private and public schools, and I recognize the underlying philosophies of these schools. I find it empowering and inspiring to know that my thoughts, values, goals, and vision have been shared with others throughout the history of education in the United States and beyond, and to know that other individuals have

implemented their own programs in various forms, even within the public school system. My philosophy, though I thought it was my own, of my own thinking and creativity, sits squarely in the tradition of those who strived to make education more democratic, authentic, and inspiring to young people, and knowing this provides me with a sense of strength and context.

I started this project knowing that I wanted an edible schoolyard, meditation, community involvement, and multicultural studies. I couldn't explain, however, why I thought that those components were important in a philosophical or historical context, though now I see that my ideas complement those that came before me. Each component that I started with reflects various elements of a progressive, democratic education. For example, establishing an edible schoolyard can do more than promote healthy eating, teach food preparation, and encourage an appreciation for and concern with the Earth, which were my original goals for that aspect of the school. Additionally, an edible schoolyard can help create a sense of authentic learning because all students eat, young people need to know how to prepare food, and the accessibility to organic, healthy food is a matter of social justice. While studying in our garden, students may learn about food deserts, they can learn about justice issues regarding pollution and landfills in certain parts of town, and they can study the impact of corporate influence in our government regarding the use of pesticides and other factors that impact food production, sales, pricing, and availability. Studying food in this way would be relevant for all students because they can see how their choices are impacted by others, and how their consumption decisions impact others. Establishing an edible garden gives young people

the power to have more options from which to choose, while simultaneously teaching them skills that will last a lifetime.

Parker J. Palmer followed *The courage to teach* (1989) with *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey* (1993). In his follow-up book, Palmer explains:

The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.... The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community's bonds. (p. 8)

Perhaps I am extreme in my views, but I strongly believe that if we continue to maintain the status quo, if we continue to ignore the real struggles that face us, humans will not have many more generations ahead. Between the devastating impacts that humans are having on the environment, the endless wars being fought around the planet, and the greed that creates obesity and starvation, life on Earth cannot continue in this trajectory. However, I also feel that if enough people work together to rebuild “broken selves and worlds,” as Parker (1993, p. 8) suggests, the future can be one filled with hope, peace, justice, and love. This future is not guaranteed, but rather, requires intentional vision and intentional action towards that end. If we continue to educate for the status quo, then we will continue to see inequity, injustice, war, and greed. If, on the other hand, humans can work together to “enter and embrace the reality of the other” (Parker, 1993, p. 8) in a way that honors rather than dismisses or punishes, and if we “allow the other to enter and embrace our own” (Parker, 1993, p. 8), then we can grow to recognize that we are all on

this planet together, we all need love and nourishment, and so does the planet. If we can learn to work together to provide nourishment, compassion and peace on Earth, then we can say that we have successfully educated children for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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