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In this study, I explore the problem of 21st century *educator existential oppression* (my term) as the negation of personal and pedagogical personhood that I experienced as a result of my confrontations (across three separate schools) with oppressive policies and practices instituted by the neoliberal business model within the institution of education. I use my story to reflect the individual educator's situation of dehumanization as it has become embedded within a neoliberal pedagogy of standardization, measurement, and objectification, asserting that this is an increasingly common phenomenon among contemporary educators. I discuss philosophical conceptions of oppression, personhood, and pedagogy through the lens of existentialism, positioned as a humanizing response to the dehumanization of neoliberal educational ideology. Emphasizing the existential attitude of intentional self-consciousness for self-reclamation (personhood) and resistance to oppression, I also address existential tenets that inform my current efforts toward teaching for freedom in the undergraduate classroom. Four existential questions frame the conclusion of this study, the responses to which prioritize the concept of integrity as fundamental to the pursuit of an individual pedagogy of personhood and the rehumanization of education, even inferring the community at large. The methodology of this study is an integration of philosophical analysis and scholarly personal narrative writing (SPN), the latter including reflections and commentaries interspersed throughout the study, along with excerpts from post-class,

teaching field notes (spring 2013, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro), most

notably in Chapter IV.

IN PURSUIT OF A PEDAGOGY OF PERSONHOOD:

EXISTENTIALISM AND POSSIBILITIES

FOR EDUCATOR LIBERATION

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To the memory of Maxine Greene, whose example as an intellectual woman and
educational philosopher inspires my sense of possibility and becoming
as I continue to go in search of myself.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Sheryl J. Lieb, has been approved by the following

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CHAPTER I

SELF-PORTRAIT: AN ILLUSTRATION OF EDUCATOR EXISTENTIAL OPPRESSION

Background Reflections on the Situation of Educator Existential Oppression: Written at the 2013 South Atlantic Philosophy of Education Society (SAPES) Conference

At this 2013 SAPES conference, it is fitting that I recall personal reflections of the 2012 SAPES conference. Around this time last year, professors, scholars, students, and philosophical advocates came together to present and discuss their work, many troubled by the ongoing dominance of economized and politicized educational policies associated with a conservative, marketplace agenda, commonly defined or labeled as neoliberalism. Throughout the proceedings, I heard echoing calls for resistance to ideologies of standardization and testing, privatization, and hard-line budgets that minimize or eliminate the humanities and the arts in school curriculum. Voices rose in unified agreement, arguing for a more humane approach to education for all human beings. I recall experiencing a sense of righteous support for my own, humanistic sensibilities while, at the same time, still aware of mounting frustration with an educational system that I view as dehumanizing to teachers and students alike. At an academic conference such as this, like-minded participants tend to critique the status quo with candor. Nonetheless, as a collective, we were speaking to the proverbial "choir," an audience of academics, scholars, students, and philosophical advocates who may not all have agreed on every point raised, but who all shared in an existential exercise of thoughtful interchange in the spirit of intellectual and philosophical camaraderie.

Was this conference experience reflective of a collective "existential attitude" (Solomon, 2005, p. xi) grounded in overt actions of resistance to a present oppressor; that is to say, an attitude of self-awareness within oneself and of one's present situation from which the individual or group chooses to act on their freedom? Not in that moment, I would assert, because the existential attitude, as I interpret it, emerges from an acutely internalized consciousness of self "facing a confused world that [I] cannot accept" (Solomon, 2005, xii), a world in which I do not find myself "at home" (Solomon, p. xii). It is from this grounding that I must first announce to myself and then decide, with purposeful intention, that I must do something to change my situation because I can no longer tolerate my

existence as it is. This is to say that I can no longer tolerate a dehumanizing experience of existence in which I am not affirmed as a subjectively thinking/choosing/acting person. So, instead, I think the conference served as a reminder of the possibilities that might emerge from within the individual educator upon awakening to her existential attitude and deciding to act.. From this basis, the individual educator can choose to act as resistor and/or liberator within her particular situation; not with a guarantee of success, but yet as a self-empowered individual intent on a vision of personal and pedagogical freedom. In other words, for those of us who believe in educating for the individual and collective good, I suggest that we each step outside the doors of safe communion and individually advance our conception of education as a decidedly human project.

An Educational Journey from Freedom to Existential Oppression

Overview

In my case, to viscerally know the phenomenon of educator existential oppression is to have first known its opposite: existential freedom in the realm of education. Thus, my experience of existential oppression did not manifest immediately, instead creeping into the crevices of my being after an initial five years of knowing a sense of personal and professional integrity in the workplace. In fact, the first five years of my employment as an elementary school library media specialist could be defined as an ongoing experience of freedom—personal and pedagogical—encouraged by a particularly enlightened administrator within a particular school setting. As a result, with personal, intellectual, and professional integrity validated on a regular basis in this environment, classroom teachers, academic specialists, and staff members could define their purposes and act out their roles as affirmed individuals who had chosen one of the "impossible professions" (Britzman, 2009, p. 3) through which to enact their life projects as they understood them at that moment in time.

In my case, as an academic specialist whose focus was library-based instruction and management over thirteen years of employment in the public school system, the terminology used to designate my position has been both variable and interchangeable: school librarian, teacher-librarian, media coordinator, school library media coordinator, and school library media specialist, to name the most common descriptors used. Underscoring these somewhat convoluted terms is the fact that I was an educator, with an obligatory Master's degree in Library Science and Information Studies, whose classroom was the school library; or, to accommodate the technological orientation of late 20th century and 21st century perspectives, the school library became known as the media center.

With my role as "school library media specialist" initially understood as a centralized position intended to serve students, teachers, staff, and school operations in a variety of ways (both academic and non-academic), I welcomed the challenge of integrating my roles as educator, library manager, information specialist, collection development specialist, and school leader. Library management skills and collection development notwithstanding, I vigorously embraced the role of teacher-librarian as the most important of my many functions and considered teaching the most significant and meaningful component of my work. In fact, and in line with the emphasis on teaching promoted by my master's degree program, I placed strategic emphasis on my role as educator, envisioning what a vibrantly intellectual, viable, and accessible school library program should look like, and how it should function. In other words, I made the library my classroom by correlating library-based instruction with traditional classroom

curriculum. Meeting with classroom teachers on a weekly basis, I created lesson plans that integrated core curriculum with the district's information skills curriculum across grade levels and academic disciplines, including English/Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Geography. Essentially, I crafted my project as a teacher/librarian with a purposeful intent that reflected my subjective stance as a person choosing to do the work of educating in my particular way. I chose and acted from a stance of personhood that was consistent with my personal and professional values.

Not pressed or required to outrightly define or defend my pedagogical stance at the time, I now realize that my pedagogical orientation has always been grounded in personhood, an orientation through which I have naturally manifested my subjective self and my personally conceived purpose as an educator. It makes sense, then, that this organically derived pedagogy of personhood would lead to subsequent choices and actions undertaken to advance my vision of education as a continuing human relationship of personal and inter-personal dimensions, built upon a foundation of intellectual freedom, interactive dialogue, and subjective modes of meaning making. Such a pedagogy of personhood is not defined by objective measures or narrowly outlined standards of performance. Rather, a pedagogy of personhood aligns with Pinar's (2012) description of curriculum as "complicated conversation" (p. xv), reinforcing my view of pedagogy as a uniquely human undertaking in which the teacher's (and student's) subjectivity is integral to the dialogical moment and to the critical meaning making that ensues from it. Therefore, to understand a pedagogy of personhood as rooted in dialogical relationships is to understand "subjectivity's significance to the complicated conversation

that is the school curriculum" (p. xv) because, as human subjects, we (teachers and students) are wholly essential to creating that conversation and the meaning that can be derived from it. Furthermore, and from the perspective of a critically oriented pedagogy and its relation to teacher subjectivity, Freire (1998) provides a conception of education as "that specifically human act of intervening in the world" (p. 99), a pedagogical orientation that is only possible in a space of intellectual freedom because, as Freire states, "I cannot be a teacher if I do not perceive with ever greater clarity that my practice demands of me a definition about where I stand" (p. 99). On all these points, teacher subjectivity remains an issue of existential, political, pedagogical, and ethical proportions, especially in these neoliberal times.

   To reiterate, it is quite clear to me that my vision of a pedagogy of personhood was, in fact, supported by a uniquely visionary principal, Mr. H, who sat at the helm of the first school in which I worked. Despite the fact that this particular elementary school was steeped in the impoverishment of an extremely economically depressed neighborhood, it was, nevertheless, especially enriched by the earthy humanity of its students and their families, further supported by the school's creatively dedicated teachers and staff members. In this setting, under these circumstances, and under the liberating direction of Mr. H, I experienced the freedom that I associated and continue to associate with a pedagogy of personhood; that is, a teaching practice that affirms both teachers and students as subjective individuals and as pedagogical partners. As a direct result of this pivotal, first-time teaching experience, a benchmark was established. Stated another way, a precedent was set from which I could envision the advancement of my

project of personal, professional, and intellectual freedom in the realm of education.

However, with a changing of the guard after the first five years, the abrupt experience of repression wrought by new leadership disrupted previously embraced conceptions and practices of pedagogical freedom under Mr. H. In effect, to have gone from freedom to oppression, seemingly overnight, was a shock to the very foundation of what I intrinsically understood as the integrity and authentic expression of my personhood in my role as educator. This is to say that my very freedom to *be* who I knew and crafted myself to be, in my role of teacher and from my self-conceived wholeness as a human being, was no longer affirmed. Encapsulating this situation as an existential problem of teacher subjectivity and integrity set against the demands of an anti-human pedagogy, Palmer (2007) states, "*good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*" (p. 10). With the denial of my being, I understood that my humanity as an agentic subject was threatened, as was my pedagogy of personhood. How could I *be* and teach from a coherent space of integrity, grounded in humanistic modes of connection and conversation, when a 21st century, neoliberal pedagogy of objectification (of knowledge and people), standardization, and technicism was becoming evermore entrenched in the public school system?

It took transfers to two additional school settings, marked by progressively oppressive experiences in each, before I fully awakened to my own existential attitude of non-compliance with an intolerable status quo. In my acute awareness of my own situation of existential oppression, a state of being that I could no long mask or tolerate, I

knew that I had to decide what I would do to advance my quest for personal and pedagogical freedom in the world of education

I have, thus, situated the course of my journey as an educator in a large public school system, beginning with an idealized experience of existential freedom that, over time and across three different school settings, retreated into a dehumanizing experience of educator existential oppression. From a decidedly personal perspective, I use my story to subjectively contextualize the inhumanity of 21st century, neoliberal educational policies and practices as they work to break down the individual educator's sense of self in both the public and private realms of her existence. Because this actually happened to me, one of multitudes of educators in my city and beyond, I believe that aspects of my experience will resonate with other persons currently working in the field. It could be that another educator will recognize and claim her own experience of workplace existential oppression; and, in doing so, possibly decide that resistance to her situation is possible, if for no other reason than for the reclamation of herself should attempts to change her situation within the system prove unsustainable. On this note, I suggest that reclamation of self is not only the first step toward resistance, it is the most fundamental step for being able to live with a sense of existential wholeness that can be eventually, at some point in time and somewhere, be translated into a humanizing pedagogy that encompasses attitudes of present resistance and future possibility. Only then, I believe, might we each be able to infuse our teaching practices with integrity and authenticity, even within the neoliberal gates that seek to enclose us.

Next, I present the specifics of my journey from academic freedom to existential oppression, focusing on individual schools and their attendant scenarios along the way. I refer to each school in which I worked by using the first letter of the school's name, followed by either elementary school or middle school. Subsequent references to these particular schools will take the form of complete initials. For example: P Elementary School (initial reference) will become PES (relative to subsequent references to that same school).

P Elementary School (PES): An Introduction to Personhood and Academic Freedom in the Elementary School

I approached my first job in the public school system (1998) with the new educator's idealistic frame of mind and purpose, positioned as a school library media specialist in a Title I elementary school located in the heart of a low-income community that served grade levels Pre-K-5. As a Title I school, my new workplace was eligible to receive

> financial assistance [provided] through state educational agencies (SEAs) to local educational agencies (LEAs) and public schools with high numbers or percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards. (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d., "Response:," para. 1)

Undeterred by the challenge of working in a school where students were typically short on academic resources and foreigners to financial privilege, I overflowed with creative ideas about how to engage and empower students with the love of literature, reading, and conducting research, from the printed page to the Internet. I was well prepared to collaborate with classroom teachers so that I could create library-based lessons that

would support and reinforce classroom instruction in novel (no pun intended) and alternative ways. I was ready to serve the school with programs and materials that would encourage use of the library for both whole classes and individual students relative to instruction, research, and certainly for discovering previously unknown worlds and ideas to be found in literature.

From the very beginning of my tenure at this elementary school, I was received as a valued member of the community, keenly aware that my expertise and skills were needed and welcomed. Here, the broaching of new ideas to broaden the scope and depth of library usage (for students and teachers alike) was an exercise in democratic action because shared discussions opened windows of possibilities and opportunities in which we could all potentially share and benefit. In this small school culture that celebrated diversity, democracy, and individuality, I was enabled to teach library-based lessons across most of the academic disciplines, including language arts, science, history, geography, art, and music, subsequently integrating these disciplines with the library and information skills curriculum for which I was solely responsible. Additionally, I created and co-created (with classroom teachers) school-wide programs to support the infusion of social justice issues within the academic curriculum, annually inviting guest speakers to participate in these specially created programs. In particular, a fifth-grade program, "Positive Role Models for Youth," became an annual event in the school library and included the participation of local government and community leaders invited to serve as panel members. From an academic standpoint and from my position as library educator, what is important to understand here is that the "Positive Role Models for Youth" event

was the culmination of a 4-5 week-long literature study unit on social justice issues represented in children's literature. As such, I conducted weekly author study classes across grades K-5, doing "real-life" teaching, in preparation for the culminating panel discussion event.

I loved being *that* kind of school library media specialist because I was living my educational philosophy, a philosophy grounded in existential principles of individual freedom and subjectivity for both teachers and students, intellectual freedom, and an emphasis on pedagogy as a dialogical and critical endeavor. I was being myself, naturally living my personhood within and through my project of teaching and learning, doing good and meaningful work. My pedagogical values were not compromised because they served, in fact, as an extension of my personal values. With my personhood intact and in sync with my way of being a teacher, I felt an integrity that one might say speaks to both the mind and the spirit. I was not in conflict with myself in this particular educational scenario. Furthermore, my pedagogical values were consistently affirmed through my interactions with co-workers and school administration. In this way, my humanity was affirmed, externally and internally, reinforcing the experience of myself as an agentic subject in my role as educator.

Specifically, I attribute much of my professional freedom at PES to a principal who was an independent thinker, an administrative leader who vocally expressed his opposition to micro-management and school bureaucracy. He often said to me, "I figure that you know a lot more about libraries than I do, so keep doing what your are doing. If I have to get involved in a decision, I will let you know." Mr. H let all staff members know

that he respected individuality, personal passion, and demonstrated competence. On the other hand, he had absolutely no appetite for bureaucratic manipulation or for in-house gossip. He also maintained a cardinal rule that he would never be a "mass punisher." In other words, if he ascertained a problem pertaining to either personal or organizational misbehaviors, he addressed the issue with the individual(s) or groups involved, in privacy and with appropriate discretion.

This unusual elementary school principle, clearly not cut from either the cloth of conformity or the hegemonic fabric of power, maintained another simple but profound adage that I carry with me to this day, "If you make it an issue, it will become an issue." In other words, we are each responsible for our teaching praxes and for our professional conduct, and we must choose that which we wish to emphasize in our interactions with students and with our peers. Above all, Mr. H was a particular individual who, by example, advanced the ideal of a pedagogy of personhood because he lived his words; because he demonstrated "the virtue of coherence" (Freire, 1998, p. 100) between his theory and his practice, between his personal values and pedagogical values, living the integrity of his personhood. Therefore, as a leader and as an administrative role model, Mr. H's example inspired the teachers at this school to pursue their own pedagogies of personhood.

PES: Regime change and the introduction of neoliberal leadership. Although all staff members at my school were subject to end-of-grade testing procedures and other forms of neoliberal standardization policies and procedures as dictated by the school district and the state, for the most part, the negative effects of neoliberal ideology did not

infect this school's culture over the initial five years of my employment under Mr. H's leadership. However, things changed abruptly when my independent-thinking principal decided to retire, to be followed by a micro-managing principal, Ms. M, who represented herself as a proud follower of district policy and the expanding political-economic turn in education at the time (mid-2000s). Not only did this new, in-coming principal dictate a different agenda for the school, symbolizing her critical judgment of the program inherited from her predecessor, she even imposed her judgmental gaze on the educator's physical being. During a specific encounter in the school library in which we were discussing my teaching/academic priorities and the school library program as a whole, I became uncomfortably aware of her visibly surveying the landscape of my attire, as if to assess the worthiness of my appearance in accordance with her particular ideals of correctness, her vision of the proper educational "look" for the staff she had inherited.

When school administrations change, there will certainly be adjustments with which all teachers, staff, and students must contend. However, Ms. M's leadership style was clearly autocratic, evidenced by the implementation of micro-management policies that reeked with authoritarianism, harshness, and objectification of teachers and staff members. In horrifying contrast to Mr. H's support of a pedagogy of personhood, this new wave of administrative and pedagogical authoritarianism, embodied in the form of one particular person, crashed into this school's cultural frameworks with a powerful force, resulting in numerous teacher transfers at the end of Ms. M's first year of tenure. Worse, this new wave of authoritarian leadership paved the way for the development of a

new school culture bred on distrust, competition, and outright fear of reprisal for being

oneself, for being an individual, and certainly for practicing a pedagogy of personhood.

PES under neoliberal leadership: School personnel cuts. My last year at PES

(my sixth year in total at this school), and my first year working under Ms. M's

dictatorial regime, coincided with worsening budget cuts approved by state education

legislation that encompassed elimination of key assistant positions, including that of my

media assistant, along with the elimination of the school's technology teacher/facilitator.

As a direct result of these cuts, my job became more technical, clerical, and task-driven

because it was my media center assistant who had previously attended to all the clerical

duties essential to making the school library operate, allowing me to focus on teaching

and academic programming. Therefore, whereas previously my assistant's valuable work

allowed me to drive my academic vision forward, I now had to reverse the order of

priorities in my work. The library had to function. Books (current and newly purchased)

had to be processed and checked out. Thousands of dollars' worth of newly mandated

Guided Reading sets, intended for classroom use, had to be processed and distributed

(manually and electronically) through the library's automation system, and a whole new

section of the library had to be revamped in order to accommodate housing these

materials. As such, and as the newly assigned warehouse for these sets, it took the entire

school year for me, alone, to complete this particular project. Beyond that, classroom

equipment had to be maintained, either earmarked for repair or replaced with the

purchase of new equipment, and the generation of help-desk tickets for computer-related

problems became a major daily undertaking. Clearly, my roles as educator, information

specialist, and library programmer were submerged under the weight of these newly mandated clerical roles and tasks.

The rumblings of my existential discontent, meaning my increasing sense of imprisonment within the oppressive confines of the neoliberal agenda enacted by this new, dictatorial administrator, grew increasingly louder as I experienced myself becoming a piece of the anti-human machinery, held in check and maintained in "proper" place in order for the media center to operate according to the technicist priorities of the neoliberal plan. As such, and with the loss of key personnel, it became undeniably evident that technical tasks would be given priority over human interactions; academic activities would become increasingly rote, while objectification of teachers and their pedagogical practices would be the new norm of PES's instructional focus. I felt personally affronted by the officially sanctioned objectification of both my academic standards and my standing as an independently thinking educator. Ultimately, I vowed to myself that I would transfer to another school in the district for the upcoming school year, and I did just that. I suppose that I instinctively understood, at that situated point in time, that an oppressive work environment would be an unhealthy one, and I saw no way to successfully resist the oppressive policies put in place under this new leadership.

In looking back on my motivations for leaving, I now understand that I attributed this unanticipated experience of educator existential oppression specifically to the decisions and actions of one individual, Ms. M. As a result of her powerful position as the new school leader, buttressed by her adherence to hard line, neoliberal policies, Ms. M's willingness to effect swift and sweeping changes during that first year of regime

change was indisputable. I feared what was to come the next year. Moreover, even though my sense of self as an independently thinking individual was still intact at the time of my decision to transfer, this unexpected introduction to workplace oppression came as a genuine shock to my system. Thus sensitized and keenly aware of dangers lurking ahead, all I could envision for my immediate future at PES was a progressively encroaching devaluation of my subjective stance as an individual, the marginalization of my intellectual values and principles as an educator, and the overall dehumanization of the school environment. I perceived this devaluation, marginalization, or outright denial of my individual stance as a very real threat to the foundation of my personal, philosophical, and pedagogical being. Ultimately, my perception of this new regime and its leader as a real and present threat to my personal and professional existence loomed far larger than any desire or challenge I could muster to convince myself to stay put and express resistance from within.

H Elementary School (HES): Transferring to a New Elementary School

I transferred to a different elementary school setting within the same public school system, H Elementary School, another Title I school located in a very rough part of the city. The school's location never bothered me. I liked working with diverse students and teachers. I liked the *realness* of interacting with people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. Essentially, I endeavored to create a library program similar to the one I had originally created at my previous school, PES. I even had a half-time assistant in the mornings who drove a school bus in the afternoons. Things were going well enough at first, but once again, bureaucratic changes were steadily and firmly infiltrating school

culture by way of neoliberal policies and mandates, centralizing around an increasingly overriding emphasis on prescriptive, standardized teaching methods and incessant testing activities that began to take over the library space and my teaching schedule. The fear and dread I had associated with the previous year's brush with existential oppression and the dehumanization of school culture, embodied by Ms. M and the implementation of her neoliberal agenda at PES, began to surface again, and with alarming intensity.

Within a short period of time since transferring to my new school, it became quite clear that my experience of pedagogical freedom during my first five years of employment under Mr. H's administrative watch at PES, was not to be duplicated here at HES. The refuge that I had sought with this transfer, hoping to recover a former sense of personal and professional integrity,was not to be. While my new principal was generally reasonable and open to hearing alternative, sometimes critical points of view, she was visibly compromised in her role as school leader by the narrow policies of standardization imposed by the neoliberal agenda. Thus, it was important for me to understand that HES, too, had clearly become another casualty of the neoliberal regime. In this case, the presence of a more humane principal was rendered ineffective because of the overpowering controls imposed by the district school system in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), It seemed that with each passing year since this school reform legislation was passed, the controls associated with its standardizing, data-driven pedagogical frameworks had become increasingly tightened. *Note that the historical contexts of NCLB , as they pertain to the encroachment of neoliberal ideology in education, will be addressed in chapter II.

At this juncture in the journey, then, it is important to pause the story in order to underscore a more fundamental understanding of neoliberal culture's impingement on a view of education as a phenomenon of humanization. In essence, neoliberalism represents a business ideology that has been adapted to the educational setting. According to Pinar (2012), who refers to neoliberal education as "school deform" (p. xiii), American public education has been re-visioned and remodeled as a corporate entity in which individual "schools have been converted from educational institutions to businesses, in their latest incarnations as cram schools" (p. xi); schools in which students "are pressed to do one thing: produce higher scores on high-stake standardized exams" (p. xii). As such, the bottom line of business, monetary profit, has been refitted to the realm of schooling, the bottom line of which is test scores, the latest currency of student and teacher success. To be more specific, success for the student equates to a one-size-fits-all test performance resulting in high scores. Success for the teacher is based on her students' test performances, with "accountability" being the operative word to measure her effectiveness (and worth to the school and the greater school system) for successfully teaching to the test. On this view, everything and everyone involved in education has a data-driven price tag. With the educational business transaction ostensibly accomplished, I am compelled to ask, "At what price to genuinely human development, creativity, and responsible citizenship?" Pinar (2012) responds, "Installing the instrumentalization of teaching as preparation to standardized tests vitiates academic study by stripping it of both subjectivity and the world, leaving us with neither intellect nor soul" (p. 33). It

would seem, then, that we are paying the price for an anti-human pedagogy with our uniquely human intellectual capacities and the subjective truths of our souls.

Amidst such conditions of school deform at HES, I experienced a mounting tension between my waning existential and pedagogical freedoms and the experience of dehumanization wrought by neoliberal policies and practices as they intruded upon my daily life there. The anxiety of working in conflict with my professional beliefs and personal values consistently simmered beneath the surface of the "ordinary" school day, progressively encroaching upon my now fragile connections to my own selfhood and resulting in a philosophical war within myself. While this kind of tension was sometimes visible in specific situations, it was yet chronically present as an invisible, oppressive weight upon my soul, adding to an unabiding sense of personal and pedagogical marginalization. Still, in my own mind, I continued to search for a rationale behind the experience of school-based existential oppression that would not close the doors to my career in public education.

A rationale for my experience of existential oppression: Elementary school culture. As I increasingly withered and cowered under the neoliberal storms of objectifying rules and regulations now overtaking HES, my transfer school, I developed a rationalistic *story* (my emphasis) to explain the situation in which I now found myself at HES. Different from my previous experience of existential oppression at PES under the dictatorial leadership of Ms. M (which, in retrospect, I naively attributed to her alone, as opposed to seeing her as representative of the larger system of neoliberal oppression in education), I could not blame the principal at HES because she was not dictatorial by

nature or design. She, too, was oppressed in her role as school administrator, having to comply with the system's mandates in order to keep her job. Nonetheless, despite the various overt and covert signals of system-wide oppression, I found myself unprepared, unable, or unwilling to recognize the larger picture of dehumanization represented by the expansion of the neoliberal agenda across all levels of the school system. I did not want to believe that there was no longer a place for me in K-12 public education. So, I chose to shield my eyes from the bigger picture, rationalizing that neoliberal policies were more purposefully targeted at elementary schools where younger children and their teachers could be more easily manipulated and controlled. I convinced myself that because elementary education centers on the youngest of learners, learners requiring much more structure, control, and parental-type authority, that elementary school educators were categorized in a like manner. In other words, and in kind, elementary school teachers needed to teach from the standpoints of structure, control, and authority. But, does such a rationale ever justify the imposition of oppressive policies and practices at any level of schooling? Certainly not. Nevertheless, and already existentially oppressed, I could think of no other option, but escape, because my individual efforts at pursuing a pedagogy of freedom and personhood were continually subverted under teaching and testing mandates that co-opted my pedagogical priorities, my time, my physical teaching space, and my existential integrity and well-being.

Ultimately, I convinced myself that the cultures of the middle and high schools were less susceptible to neoliberal education's oppressive tactics because adolescents and teenagers, while also needing structure and certain controls, were not as easily

manipulated intellectually and emotionally. I convinced myself that the notion of intellectual freedom and a more challenging style of pedagogy could still be effected at these levels. Again, in retrospect, I now believe that this was wishful thinking on my part, but my rationale at that time also indicated that I was not yet ready to either fully accept neoliberal educational culture nor quit public education. My attempts at resistance in the elementary school setting being short-lived and futile, I was yet seeking an alternative venue in the public school system that might prove to be a haven of hope for possibilities of existential and pedagogical freedom.

Thus giving myself an out with which I could choose to believe that moving to a higher level within public school education would afford me the personal and academic freedom I was desperately seeking, I sought a transfer to a middle school for the following academic year, after having worked only one year at HES. Besides, on the middle and high school levels, full-time media assistants were still the norm while, on the elementary school level, media assistants were virtually eliminated or, in a few isolated cases, kept as part-time employees. Perhaps I could resume being a teacher-librarian in the middle school setting, an educator hungry for personal and intellectual freedom, hoping to reclaim her right to a pedagogy of personhood.

M Middle School (MMS): Transferring to the Middle School

After just one year spent at a second elementary school where existential oppression emerged, in my mind, as a phenomenon of elementary school culture, I successfully negotiated a transfer to a middle school position. Surely, I would be regarded as a well-educated and responsible adult in the middle school setting, capable of

implementing and managing an effective school library program in which study, erudition, research skills, and a decided emphasis on literature could co-exist with technology as a tool of support with which to advance the causes of study and intellectual freedom. Point in fact, technology became an immediate issue in my tenure in the middle school because, inheriting a 20-year-old library program in which my predecessor resisted many of the necessary and advantageous aspects of the district's library automation system, I was charged with updating the middle school library's circulation and library management systems with the district's designated software programs. To me, this particular use of technology was not only essential, but it made complete sense because such operations-focused software programs and the tasks that drove them (i.e., clerical work in a technological sense) could be delegated to the media assistant (a position still retained at the middle and high school levels), thereby affording me the opportunity to establish a school library program dedicated to a broad range of academic and library-related pursuits. Not only was I hopeful regarding my move to the middle school environment, I was also looking forward to building a sense of community with presumably like-minded individuals, educators dedicated to sharing their subjective stances across their intellectual and pedagogical projects.

The middle school: A culture of affluence and influence. Having only worked in Title I elementary schools prior to the middle school, I had never experienced a school environment in which capitalism seemed to be so foundational to the school's values and cultural environment, and supported by a community of amenable administrators, compliant staff members, and very significantly, a core group of affluent and influential

parents. The latter group, parents, was a visible source of power and influence at this school, located in an upper middle class neighborhood surrounded by tree-lined streets and mansion-sized homes, because a great many of them chose not to work outside the home. Along with their family and social agendas, they involved themselves, to both greater and lesser degrees, in the school as PTA officers, tutors, and social events planners.

To be fair, the school also "served" a large population of refugee students and a student population classified as "low-income" (primarily students representative of racial and ethnic minorities) who were bussed into this neighborhood. While it was a fortunate and laudable state of affairs that these socially and financially powerful parents (as well as some other parents not so socially embedded or financially able) saw fit to provide tutoring services and donated clothing to students identified as "needy," I found it yet ironic that this same group of socio-economically privileged parents would routinely determine how the school library was to be utilized in terms of *their* social and political agendas. Whether co-opting the library teaching and circulation schedules for PTA sponsored fundraisers, special events, and programs, or taking over the library as a space in which to provide their volunteer services (many of which were justifiable and many of which were not in my view), they profoundly hindered (with the backing of school administrators) my ability to establish a library program that might challenge the status quo of school library as a special events venue and as a testing center (to be addressed more fully in the following section). On this point, it became very evident to me that my predecessor, along with her long-time (and my current) assistant, had not only complied

with, but advocated for the school library as the social center of the school, thereby maintaining a view of the library setting as a venue under the purview and control of outside authorities rather than as an academic site managed under the jurisdiction of the teacher-librarian.

A few months into my first of six years at this school, I came to understand how the library program was, for the most part, pre-determined by the school's culture of affluence and influence, at the beck and call of parents whose wishes and priorities were supported by an accommodating school administration. Without realizing it when I accepted this position, I had walked into a pre-fabricated culture of power relationships, the actors involved seemingly unaware or uncaring about the credibility and integrity of educator personhood; that is, unless the educator chose to go along with the status quo, ready and willing to advance the social programming function of the library as it was instituted many years prior. In fact, when I questioned the situation and attempted to make certain changes, my assistant typically responded, "This is the way we have always done things here."

How does a school culture of affluence and influence support neoliberal educational ideology? Clearly, both are grounded in socio-economic priorities purposed toward particular goals and power structures. I posit the assumption that the goals of the parent-base at this school were in line with the neoliberal agenda of education as it was implemented there because private school, as an alternative option to this public middle school, was certainly a financially doable option for a great many of them. Why did these parents, as a collective entity, not resist the standardization and objectification measures

that dominate neoliberal ideology? Did they, in fact, agree with neoliberal educational policies and practices? Or, were they and their children simply comfortable in this insulated environment of affluence and influence? I do not know.

Neoliberal ideology and middle school culture.

Appropriation of the school library as testing center. Over the course of my first year at the middle school, my vision of a more sophisticated, intellectual, and open-minded school culture began to fade away while my consternation and disappointment increased in proportion to the escalating use of the school library as a catch-all location for any number of programs and events beyond the purview of the library program. Within a few months of my employment at MMS, I began to understand that my position at the middle school was not that of a school library media specialist understood as educator or teacher-librarian, but as a coordinator of events and, most especially, as overseer of the school's centralized testing facility. As such, I became the figurehead of a library space that was seen as the school's command center/site for standardized testing (regularly administered Benchmark tests, ESOL-English for Speakers of Other Languages tests, Exceptional Children tests, End of Grade tests, End of Course tests, etc.) throughout the school year. It is also important to clarify that with the provision of each specific test, there were follow-up dates scheduled for retests and make-up tests. For example, each time a Benchmark test was scheduled for a particular week, it was understood that retests and make-up tests (for absent students) would follow days, sometimes a week, later, thereby extending the "occupation" of the library as testing site.

I grew increasingly agitated by the frequency with which I had to close the library for testing purposes. In fact, many teachers and students would stop by and ask me, "When will the library be open again for book check-out?" "When can I schedule lessons with you in the library?" In other words, not "when will the library be closed?" Being *regularly closed* (my emphasis) for testing purposes became the norm, the default setting, of the school library schedule. On the other hand, being regularly open and accessible became the exception. Finally, out of mounting frustration and as a strategic act of resistance, I calculated the amount of hours, days, and weeks that the library was out of commission due to testing during a particular academic year, the total amounting to three full months out of a ten-month school year in which approximately two weeks in December and a week between March and April are lost due to the Christmas/Winter holiday break period and spring break. In addition, it should be noted that the month of May is primarily a testing period (as opposed to instructional month), with the culminating end-of-grade tests dominating the operations of the school. I showed this information to my principal who understood my concerns, but maintained that there was no other viable venue on the school campus that could accommodate testing procedures for such large and varied numbers of students. In this way, closing the library was justified, with no possibilities for change. To my disappointment and mounting frustration, the library would remain the school's centralized testing center.

Objectification of the educator. With my role reduced to that of testing facilitator, event scheduler, and technology help-desk overseer, I came to believe that academics and opportunities for intellectual flourishing were not associated with the functions of this

school library. The curricular course of study under my authority, library and information skills, was not part of the "tested" curriculum and, consequently, not subject to end-of-grade testing mandates. As such, the subjects and skills I taught were superfluous to the bottom line of test scores, teacher accountability, and so-called school "success." Furthermore, my experience in school library management was evidently a non-essential asset in this middle school because, as I came to realize, this library was already "managed" in a style conditioned to the wishes and priorities of the school's stakeholders and gatekeepers. While I may have held the position of teacher-librarian or school library media specialist, it was in name only, the realization and ramifications of which contributed to an enlarging sense of ontological invisibility and violability. My personhood was dissolving in the everydayness of institutionally sanctioned existential oppression while the school's academic imprint was linked to a status quo attitude, submerged within a subversive and seductive call to teamwork, because "this is the way we do things here."

What does "dissolving personhood" feel like? I could say that it feels like a slow meltdown from self-connection to disconnection, a progressive unknowing of myself as a viable human being. Or, I could say that it feels like the slow melting of the form and substance of self-identity, until that form and substance deteriorate into a flatness, a nothingness of not being, of not feeling the energy of my own humanity. This is not Sartre's (1984) "Nothingness" (p. 44) of which I am speaking because Sartre's Nothingness is expressed as an integral *connection* (my emphasis) to one's being in the world as a "being-for-itself" (p. 117). "Nothingness is the peculiar possibility of being . . .

Since nothingness is nothingness of being, it can come to being only through being itself. . . . it comes to being through a particular being, which is human reality" (Sartre, 1984, p. 126). On this view, Sartre's Nothingness is the necessary counterpart to the possibilities attendant to a consciousness of being-for-oneself as a freely functioning subject in the world. In contrast to Sartrean Nothingness, what I describe as the nothingness of dissolving personhood represents the opposite pole of possibility, thus better understood as an emptiness that, for me, felt like impossibility each time my subjective stance was ignored, unaffirmed, or outrightly denied by the other who, ostensibly, held power over me. As such, my case of dissolving personhood emanated from my increasing sense of powerlessness and alienation in the middle school environment, disrupting my connection to being-for-myself as a freely choosing/acting individual.

Peripheral to my experience of objectification in MMS, but equally frustrating, was my expanding role as schedule planner and hostess for a plethora of non-library related meetings, workshops, class and grade-level parties and celebrations, and even private (non-school related) functions such as staff baby showers. The latter, functions organized around personal desires and private purposes, were imposed upon me and my workspace by school administration, seemingly in response to a school culture steeped in social appearances and conformity. Furthermore, as food and drink were always necessary features of these events, I was inadvertently delegated hostessing duties that included moving and setting up library furniture to accommodate the event at hand, serving, and cleaning up, thereby demonstrating my loyalty to the school as a team player (not to mention my concern for preserving the physical integrity of the library).

I wish to highlight two key points that reinforce my view of this particular middle school as a microcosm of social conformity and individual objectification; points that make even more relevant a conception of existential oppression as not only a political/economic manifestation of neoliberal ideology transposed to the educational arena, but equally a phenomenon of social and cultural indoctrination. First, we must nuance our understandings of conformity as a social phenomenon and objectification of the individual as the targeted dehumanization of one's personhood.

Conformity speaks to the individual's acquiescent behavior, as a follower, in yielding to the pressures exerted by the dominant group in one's socio-cultural realm. The exertion of pressure to conform may be overt in nature, such as when conformity is enforced by laws or by repressive actions exerted by the dominant group upon a weaker individual or group. Conformity can also be accomplished through more covert manipulations associated with entrenched societal norms that are mechanistically reinforced by family traditions, educational and cultural institutions, and the blare of media messages that assault our senses every day. While it may appear that conformity can be consciously chosen as one's preferred social stance, the question remains as to whether or not the conforming choice is made within a space of conscious criticality; that is, within the critical awareness of one's own subjectivity, leading to the assumption that the choice to conform has been freely and unconditionally made. On the other hand, it is possible to assume that, in relation to the breadth and depth of family, institutional, and societal pressures, individual subjectivity can be sufficiently compromised so that the

choice to conform is not only rendered available, but for many, absolutely necessary in terms of psychic and/or physical survival.

Objectification, in my view, speaks to a personally experienced process of dehumanization by which individual subjectivity and worth lose their relevance and value as qualities of personhood, certainly in the eyes of the oppressor and, over time, often in the eyes of the individual who is oppressed. For the perpetrator of dehumanizing policies and practices, objectification of the other manifests as a result of the actions taken that deny the other's humanity. Paradoxically, the dehumanizer of the other becomes, himself, less human as oppressive behavior becomes the normative feature of daily life. For the human target of dehumanizing policies and practices, objectification becomes the condition that dehumanization seeks to achieve. In essence, objectification of the individual functions not only as the conceptual opposite of human subjectivity, it is, in actual practice, the enemy of subjectivity. In his discussion of objectivism as an anti-human ideology, Palmer (2007) addresses objectivism's war with human subjectivity.

> Objectivism was never content to quarantine subjectivity in order to stop its spread. It aimed at killing the germ of "self" to secure objective truth—just as dictators kill dissenters to secure the 'public order,' and warriors kill the enemy to secure the "peace." (p. 54)

A question remains regarding the relationship of conformity to objectification: Can the individual be objectified without conforming? I posit that once the habitual *practice* (my emphasis) of objectification becomes the existential *condition* (my emphasis) of objectification within the oppressed individual's own psyche, then that individual's subjective capacities have been so compromised that conformity becomes a

given, as opposed to a choice. If, however, the process of objectification is not internalized, despite dehumanizing assaults upon the psyche, it is conceivable that the individual can remain in possession of her subjectively existential stance. Victor Frankl (2006) stands out as an extreme example of an individual whose personhood was not destroyed by dehumanization despite his horrific experience as a concentration camp prisoner during the Holocaust, famously documented in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Recounting his treatment as an inhuman object, Frankl asserts that he did not internalize his own objectification. While he conformed to Nazi demands at the cost of his life, he did not yield his subjectively inward stance, his very humanity, to his oppressors, to his fellow prisoners, and certainly not to himself. According to Frankl (2006), personhood is dependent upon the individual's "will to meaning" (p. 99), a will that can only emerge within a state of being that is subjectively human and self-conscious.

Returning to my characterization of MMS as a microcosm of social conformity and individual objectification, I make this claim based on my experience of bumping up against what emerged (for me) as an iron-clad cultural mindset of superficial social and political priorities and power games that permeated the school environment, taking precedence over academic freedom and professional integrity and responsibility. In spite of voicing my concerns (as an act of resistance) to appropriate administrators about the ongoing take-over of the school library by non-library related power groups, I continued to feel the degrading effects of personal objectification as my concerns were either ignored or negated. Ultimately, frustrated and increasingly powerless, I experienced

myself as a bystander to the events that were planned and carried out, on a regular basis, without regard for my integrity as an educator or the integrity of the library as an educational space intended to serve the educational needs of the school's students and staff. For example, (a) I learned that teachers took for granted their "right" (upheld by school administration over the years) to hold class parties in the school library. Consequently, it was routine for them to request (and expect) that I block out library space for these class celebrations (typically including the mess of food and beverages), overriding my teaching and circulation schedules, with many teachers even going so far as to write in their class celebration dates/times on my library calendar without first talking to me; and (b) I was confronted with a culture of affluence and influence, symbolized by the school's core group of parental stakeholders, who also took for granted their "right" to block out library space for their meetings and fundraisers during the school day, exercising their social privilege while objectifying my professional standing. While I certainly realized the importance of supporting school culture as a member of the faculty, in my view, the almost "at-will" confiscation of the school library program went far beyond any show of support I could legitimately sustain. I felt, and still feel, that these functions were subversive to my academic program and to my autonomy and authenticity as an educator.

Participating in my own objectification by continuing to work under these circumstances, despite failed attempts at resistance, not only weakened my academic visions and my pedagogical integrity, it contributed to a growing sense of loss, alienation from myself, as a subject in both the private and public realms of my existence.

Alternately resistant and acquiescent, always conflicted, I marched on for another three years, vowing with each summer break that I would somehow create changes that would assert my leadership of the school library program. For some reason, I was not yet ready to give up the vision.

Increase in staff budget cuts. Due to evermore system-wide budget cuts targeting school personnel, occurring approximately mid-way through my six years in the middle school, our technology teacher-facilitator position was eliminated. Consequently, I became the "go-to" person for technology matters, including trouble-shooting hardware and software issues, setting up equipment in each of the classrooms situated across two large classroom buildings, and functioning as the Help Desk liaison for a school of 1000 plus students and 60 plus employees. I also took on rudimentary maintenance duties for the school's two computer labs, still designated for use by whole classes of students throughout each school day. Although accompanied by classroom teachers, there was no real instructional oversight of students' use of the labs; no trained technology professional to oversee the operation and proper maintenance of computers and related equipment, and certainly no technology educator to instruct students about the best and most appropriate uses of technology in education. While thankful that I was not additionally charged with the duties of technology *teacher*, which would have been quite ironic since my function as *teacher-librarian* had already been usurped, technology and related clerical matters became a primary feature of my position, right alongside my responsibilities as overseer of the school library as the school's centralized testing site.

Unsuccessful resistance, and waning personhood. Over time, I continued to voice my concerns to the principal regarding the ways in which the school library was being co-opted to address priorities that had nothing to do with direct academic instruction and support, research skills instruction and support, or the provision of library resources. We also discussed how the loss of key personnel impacted the nature and quality of my work as well as the work of classroom teachers who were always under the gun to teach to the test and "produce" high test scores. While she (the principal) seemed to sympathize, conversations always ended with a hollow resignation, "This is just the way things are," and "There are no alternatives to your situation at this time."

Clearly, attempts at resistance to entrenched policies of standardized testing, to inappropriate (in my opinion) uses of the school library, and to the altering of my professional duties as a teacher-librarian were not successful, leaving no real prospects for positive change in the foreseeable future. With that realization imprinted in my psyche, my "situation" began to deteriorate more rapidly, to the point of becoming untenable as I experienced, on a daily basis, an unabiding sense of powerlessness to be the person I wanted to be and to do the kind of work I desperately wanted to do; work that would resonate with humanistic meaning and relevance consistent with my pedagogical passions and my vision of the school library as an authentic educational resource for students and faculty alike. By compromising my personal and pedagogical values in surrender to the dominant ideology of the school and the system at large, I felt inauthentic to myself and to those with whom I worked. In this state of "bad faith" (Sartre, 1984, p. 89), a state in which my thoughts and my actions were out of sync with

the "truth" of my own subjectivities, I ultimately relinquished any sense of ownership of the library as my "classroom," my academic home. Furthermore, the experience of personal and philosophical isolation, now experienced on a daily basis, was so pervasive that physical symptoms of anxiety were beginning to rule my daily life. In retrospect, I understand that I was experiencing the effects of pervasive alienation: from the school system, from the specific middle school in which I was working, and alienation from myself (my personhood) as I tried to navigate and stay afloat between two increasingly different worldviews about education.

The Present Challenge

While my particular experience of K-12 educator existential oppression is now in the past, it continues to inform the present moment in my work as a PhD candidate and educator of undergraduate students. My scholarly interests in philosophy of education, existentialism, and cultural studies have led me to the higher education classroom where I encounter, all too frequently, the effects of long-standing existential oppression embodied in many of my students. This phenomenon, in itself, is not terribly surprising since students, like teachers, have been and continue to be targets of oppression in the world of neoliberal education. As such, students exhibit their own branding of neoliberal thinking—typically expressed in their preferences for rubrics, academic work predicated on right and wrong answers, Power Point notes, and an obsession regarding grades— gleaned from years of indoctrination to standardized schooling practices. When they encounter the dialogical space of my seminar classroom, along with my emphasis on deep reading and reflective writing activities, they frequently register puzzlement and

concern. Why don't I give them prepared templates and rubrics? Why don't I give them pre-written, PowerPoint notes that they can copy and memorize? How do I grade their efforts if absent numerical test data?

This is the irony that emerges from my self-study of pedagogical personhood: the fact that a majority of my students are enrolled in the university's teacher education program, preparing to become teachers, themselves, in the K-12 sector. As products of standardized education and, now, standardized teacher training, they represent an alternative phenomenon of resistance; that is, many of these students resist critical educational practices that provoke questioning of their current and, often conventional, assumptions about the purpose and meaning of education. Subsequently, I find myself confronted with the new challenge of introducing students to a critical and philosophical pedagogy that, at least initially, feels foreign and uncomfortable to them. I embrace the challenge and make meaning of it as my continuing path of resistance to the neoliberal agenda. To be clear, my pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood is not a crusade. It is simply my way of being a scholar and an educator for freedom—individual, intellectual, and socially democratic freedom. Existentially, it is my way of expressing a wholeness and consistency of integrity in my chosen life project. It is simply my way of expressing and affirming my personhood in the world. If I touch a few students' hearts and minds in the process, possibly opening them to more deeply consider the existential and ethical possibilities of their own projects, I will feel grateful to have made that kind of human connection.

Closing Commentary

The narrative structure of this first chapter is intended to set the stage for the larger philosophical/narrative study of oppression, personhood, and existentialism as these themes constitute the study, and as they further inform my claim that educator existential oppression is a present and festering reality in the lives of contemporary educators, most obviously those in the K-12 arena. I will also address productive possibilities for those of us committed to educating for freedom, for re-humanizing pedagogical practice. In this vein, I will consistently refer to the pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood rooted in existential tenets of individual freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and personal responsibility.

Next, in Chapter II, I specifically address the frameworks of this study, including a restatement of the problem of educator existential oppression; an examination of neoliberal education and culture, referencing noted philosophers, educators, and cultural theorists; and an explanation of my unconventional choice of methodology that integrates philosophical analysis with scholarly personal narrative writing (SPN).

CHAPTER II

FRAMING THE STUDY

The Philosophical Problem: Existential Oppression of the 21st Century Educator

Educator existential oppression can be framed in the context of Freire's (2000)

discussion of oppression as a system of dehumanization, situated and exercised within an

historical milieu, yet also situated within the existential character of the individual as an

unfinished being for whom humanization is still possible. "Within history, in concrete,

objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person

as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompletion" (Freire, 2000, p. 43).

The unfinished quality of being human underscores that which is unique about

human personhood, particularly from the existential perspective. Because the individual

is not a predetermined entity, fixed and unchangeable as is an inanimate object, the

notion of human becoming takes on a uniquely evolutionary significance linked to both

formal and informal modes of teaching and learning. Further, existential themes

encompassing principles of individual freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and

responsibility reinforce the conception of human existence as a process of continual

development in which a humanizing educational experience is paramount. On the

existentialist view, then, humanizing educational experiences can only be affirmed in

freedom, and it is from a space of freedom that the individual chooses herself and her

"fundamental project" (Sartre, 1984, p. 617) in life.

> The free project is fundamental, for it is my being. . . . For the present we can say that the fundamental project which I am is a project concerning not my relations with this or that particular object in the world, but my total being-in-the-world; since the world itself is revealed only in the light of an end, this project posits for its end a certain type of relation to being which the for-itself [the free individual] wills to adopt. (Sartre, 1984, p. 617)

On this view, educator existential oppression signifies both the process perpetrated and the outcome achieved by the oppressive system of neoliberal education through its dehumanizing policies and practices.

What, then, constitutes the threat of educator existential oppression as it relates to the individual educator's project of becoming herself, as an individual and as a teacher, in the world of neoliberal education? I argue that existential oppression of the 21st century educator is the purposeful dehumanization of the educator's personal and professional *being* through the enactment and reinforcement of neoliberal educational policies and practices that deny the subjective nature of the individual, along with the exercise of her intellectual freedom. This dehumanization process is achieved by redefining education as a process of standardization and objectification based on a business model purposed toward power and profit in what is commonly referred to as the 21st century global marketplace. Thus, students are purposed toward education as a training ground for their roles as indoctrinated contributors to the profit-making goals of the nation, and teachers are purposed toward educating in the guise of obedient puppets, dehumanized to the status of objects that are manipulated and managed by the neoliberal regime. Objectified, rendered thing-like in this way, the individual educator can acquiesce or adapt to this anti-human scenario, compromising her own project of personal and professional

freedom in the process. Or, the conscious educator who does not want to relinquish her freedom as an independently thinking/choosing/acting individual might choose to resist in whatever small ways she can muster to advance her pedagogical project and, with that, her existential integrity. Regardless, the dehumanizing effects of existential oppression take their toll by compromising, at minimum, and eliminating, maximally, the educator's educational praxis as a project of freedom, humanization, and possibility for herself, for her students, and for the social good.

Why Focus on the Educator in These Neoliberal Times?

One of the most significant, but often overlooked, human casualties of the neoliberal educational system is the educator. I submit that this is because neoliberal ideology prioritizes assessment and standardized testing as the most important strategies in contemporary teaching/learning practices, the end purpose of which is to shape students into highly competent test takers who can achieve high test scores. On this view, a neoliberal conception of student personhood (i.e., successful test-taker), while skewed and deficient in my opinion, is necessarily highlighted over any substantive notion of teacher personhood since the student represents neoliberal education's hope for the future as a profit-oriented contributor to the wealth of the nation. In this educational climate, teachers are reduced to the role of transmitters of predetermined, mandated information that students must memorize in order to answer the calculated questions that comprise typical testing instruments. As such, neoliberal teaching in the 21st century perpetuates Freire's (2000) "'banking' concept of education . . . in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p. 72).

Describing the banking concept as a model of pedagogical oppression, Freire focuses on the student as the intended target of its dehumanizing practices. On the other hand, Freire (2000) positions the teacher as an authority figure who "presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence" (p. 72). I want to take Freire's representation of the "banking" teacher in another direction; that is, to depict the teacher as another target of educational oppression because, as someone trained or commanded to dehumanize others, the teacher is simultaneously devalued and dehumanized, lost to herself as a subjectively empowered individual and, thus, marginalized and isolated from her own existential project. In essence, I suggest that today's teacher is, at best, a manager of information and, at worst, a puppet, an object that performs or responds to the manipulations of those in charge of creating educational policies and implementing prescriptive educational practices.

How does the contemporary K-12 teacher respond or react to a situation in which she is no longer regarded as a *person* in the fullest sense of the word; a situation in which her personal and pedagogical values and expertise have no foothold in neoliberal education? According to Pinar (2012), many "teachers abdicate their professional authority and ethical responsibility for the curriculum they teach" (p. 4) because they succumb to their own state of disempowerment. More pointedly, "Teachers have been *forced* to abdicate this authority by the bureaucratic protocols that presumably hold them 'accountable,' but which, in fact, render them unable to teach" (Pinar, 2012, pp. 4-5). I suggest that the most extreme consequence of this dictatorial system, extending far deeper than the explicit restrictions imposed upon the teacher's freedom to teach, is the

educator's growing existential disconnection from herself, exacerbated by the disintegration of authentic relationship between her personal and pedagogical values,. Hence, my scholarly purpose for this study is to shine a brighter light on the situation of educator existential oppression, especially as it pertains to the contemporary, K-12 educator whose personhood, I submit, has been and continues to be devalued, even ignored against neoliberal education's ideology of standardization and objectification.

The following section, "Critical Perspectives on Neoliberal Education as a Force of Oppression," addresses the neoliberal educational model as a dehumanizing construct, examined through the perspectives of a variety of philosophers, educational theorists, and public intellectuals, and included as theoretical support of my position on the problem of educator existential oppression. This section is also intended to orient the reader to a reckoning with how, within a so-called democratic society, a nationally sanctioned form of educational oppression can not only be tolerated, but accepted as the educational and cultural norm for our times.

Critical Perspectives on Neoliberal Education

Voices: Scholars and Philosophers of Education

Many contemporary educational philosophers and theorists are outspoken in their criticisms of neoliberal culture and of neoliberal education, specifically. However, at this point in time, critical voices opposing neoliberal ideology do not appear able to effectively penetrate its weighty sphere of political, economic, and educational dominance. Nonetheless, voices of critique continue to echo from the intellectual and philosophical margins, even from the depths of a subjective space belonging to the

individual educator whose visions of freedom are sometimes voiced, embodied, and enacted within her particular pedagogical situation.

In this section, I explore the work of a selected group of such critics, to include Antonia Darder (2012), Shaireen Rasheed (2007), Scott Ellison (2012), David Hursh (2007), Henry Giroux (2013, in Polychroniou), Maxine Greene (1978), Joe L. Kincheloe (2011), William Ayers (2011), Parker Palmer (1990), William F. Pinar (2012), Madeleine Grumet (1995), Diane Ravitch (2013), Nel Noddings (2007), Martha Nussbaum (2010), Allan Feldman (2002), Christopher Uhl and Dana L Stuchul (2011), and Frank Smith (2011). Spanning the latter 20th and 21st centuries, these individuals express a common concern regarding the objectivist, corporate mentality that has been reproduced in public education, a mentality stoked by ideological frameworks extolling a nationally standardized curriculum of technological expertise and a view of the educational process, itself, as a training ground for future workers prepared to advance the nation's interests in the global marketplace. On this common ground of critical opinion, a general consensus as to the anti-human nature of neoliberal education emerges. At the same time, many of these same philosophers, scholars, and cultural critics offer recommendations for resistance to the neoliberal agenda, consistently based in advocacy for the subjective stance in teaching and learning, intellectual freedom, and reinvigoration of the arts and humanities in education.

On the emergence of neoliberal ideology in education. In their respective articles on the topic of neoliberal education, Ellison (2012) and Hursh (2007) each provide historical background grounded in the political/economic contexts from which

neoliberalism has emerged as the normative cultural ideology and educational paradigm

of the 21st century. In his article, "From Within the Belly of the Beast: Rethinking the

Concept of the 'Educational Marketplace' in the Popular Discourse of Education

Reform," Ellison (2012) correlates the neoliberal infiltration of American schooling to

the era of President Ronald Reagan's administration and, more specifically, to the

commission of a national report on the state of education titled *A Nation at Risk: The*

Imperative for Educational Reform (1983).

> The rise to prominence of the concept of globalization in the discourse of
> education reform can be traced to the rightward shift in American politics over the
> past thirty years and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National
> Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Framing education policy within
> the context of crisis and global economic competition, *Risk* set the stage for policy
> debates over the past 25 + years and introduced the concept of globalization into
> the lexicon of education discourse, and it did so by constructing an image of
> public schooling as a failing institution. (pp. 119–120)

The overall implication of the report was that American education was failing to

produce competent students, prepared to compete and achieve success as members of the

future workforce in an increasingly connected global marketplace. While, historically,

education and economics have always been linked in terms of job training and

professional career opportunities for future employment, the trajectory of globalization

forces and related power structures since the latter part of the 20th century has extended

well beyond learning as preparation for the responsibilities of adulthood. Instead, the

neoliberal turn in education has made learning a business project, and only those learners

capable of "passing the test" will be recognized as capable achievers (i.e., future profit

makers) whose success, as contributors to the wealth of the nation, will ultimately be defined by neoliberal standards of performance and production.

Hursh (2007) specifically casts the nation's NCLB ("No Child Left Behind") program of educational assessment and testing as "part of a larger political process in which concerns about increasing global economic competition have been a pretext for neoliberal reforms that focus on increasing efficiency through privatization, markets, and competition" (p. 514). In his article, "Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies," Hursh (2007) states, "NCLB, like other recent education policies promoting standardized testing, accountability, competition, school choice, and privatization, reflects the rise and dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative policy discourses over social democratic policy discourses" (Hursh, 2007, p. 494).

Writing from a socially analytical perspective, Hursh takes note of a seemingly collective public acceptance of NCLB, the by-product of which is an unquestioned discounting of what this educational model means for the marginalized students and educators who cannot or choose not to fit into the NCLB mold. Other than these exceptions, who constitute a generally powerless minority, the uncritical and compliant ways in which the majority of contemporary citizens understand the purposes and functions of our social institutions reflect the continuing success of neoliberal ideology as the normative cultural ideal. Pushing this point further toward the power brokers within the political arena, Hursh notes that a capitalistic orientation toward educational policies and practices dominates the nation's legislative bodies across party lines, indicating that moral and philosophical notions concerning what it means to educate and to be educated

are swept under the bureaucratic rug as if inconsequential to the well-being of the individuals involved: everyday students, educators, and citizens/taxpayers who constitute the social fabric of the country. While the following reference is dated (2007), I include it here to illustrate the socio-political contexts behind which this aspect of Hursh's argument stands: that neoliberal ideology had become (and continues to be) so entrenched in our cultural mindset that voices of critique and dissension have been virtually eliminated in our legislative bodies.

> Reforming NCLB begins with changing the way in which we conceptualize the purpose of education and of society itself. This helps explain why the recent shift from Republican to Democratic control of the federal legislature may have little effect on education legislation. Democratic leaders, including Representative Miller and Senator Kennedy, remain "steadfast supporters of the testing and accountability requirements" of NCLB (Hoff, 2006, p. 27). (Hursh, 2007, p. 494)

Successful ideological management, grounded in an objectified and standardized conception of education, work, and human existence itself, results in a state of socio-cultural conformity that tramples notions of individual personhood as a valued state of being. A neoliberal 21st century crowd mentality does not support, much less recognize, alternative possibilities that a privileging of individual subjectivity and personhood might suggest as essential to human education. Worse, the cyclic nature of teacher education in this neoliberal climate, meaning that future teachers tend to repeat their own educational experiences, will continue to anesthetize or render futile imagined possibilities of pursuing a pedagogy of personhood for so many. Ultimately, for those of us committed to existential and academic freedom, deeper philosophical and, yet, action-oriented questions remain, begging to be answered: What is required to engender a collective,

social awakening to a more humanistic and democratic notion of the purpose and meaning of education? Or, for now, is individual resistance to neoliberal education (through voicing critique and re-humanizing one's own teaching praxis, for example) our best hope for promoting and implementing small steps of change?

Neoliberalism as a threat to democracy. Darder (2012), Rasheed (2007), Giroux (2013), and Nussbaum (2010) frame many of their criticisms in a discourse that highlights neoliberal education's threats to democracy as a way of life and to the development of thoughtful, independent-thinking, and responsible citizens. A compilation of their commentaries on this point follows. Darder (2012) characterizes "neoliberal policies of education" (p. 412) as intended to overthrow or, at least, supersede "any tacit notion that we in the United States may have once had about the importance of the common good and public education as a human right" (p. 412). She explains neoliberal policies in the context of conservative ideals that embrace privatization and deregulation; ideals and goals that promote economic entrepreneurship and a right-wing, socio-political view that shuns government involvement in social welfare initiatives. Pointing to a lack of social empathy or sense of responsibility to the public at large, Darder (2012) warns of the dangerous implications concerning public education and, specifically higher education, where "policies of deregulation, privatization, and lack of concern for the public good have rendered democratic education an endangered species" (p. 414). Rasheed (2007) writes,

> the present movement toward educational reform, with its rationalistic and technologically oriented curricular objectives and overtones of a national

curriculum, threatens to eliminate the broad citizenship function of schools in
favor of a restrictive, market-and-workplace-skills perspective. (p. 1)

Likewise, Giroux (2013) argues, "As an ideology, [neoliberalism] construes profit-
making as the essence of democracy, consuming as the only operable form of citizenship,
and an irrational belief in the market to solve all problems and serve as a model for
structuring all social relations" (Giroux, as cited in Polychroniou, 2013, para. 6). Adding
her voice to those advocating for a return to genuinely democratic ideals in education,
Nussbaum (2010) states, "Distracted by the pursuit of wealth, we increasingly ask our
schools to turn out useful profit-makers rather than thoughtful citizens" (Nussbaum,
2010, pp. 141–142).

This consensus of viewpoints, from a diverse group of thinkers, all point
specifically to an alternative, democratic view of human education in which ideals of
individual freedom, community investment, and social justice constitute the goals of
teaching and learning. Democratic education, therefore, requires an emphasis on
citizenship founded upon values of freedom, shared dialogue, and personal and social
responsibility. Ultimately, what these critics are saying is that neoliberal education is
more concerned with churning out competent workers and businessmen/women, as
opposed to encouraging the development of independently thinking, responsible citizens.
How is the situation of the contemporary educator, existentially and professionally,
implied in this assessment of neoliberalism's de-democratization of education? In my
view, the answer is implicitly obvious; that where there is no freedom for students, there
is little to no freedom for their teachers. In this mandated world of educational standards

and objectives, the teacher's freedom to be an individual who chooses to teach, as someone subjectively invested and dedicated to education as the foundation of human development and as the repository of democratic social ideals, is inconsequential, actually inessential, to the neoliberal worldview and its profit-making project. Once again, lack of freedom speaks to a situation of oppression. Concerning the individual teacher, oppression in the educational realm functions as the denial of her subjective stance, her personhood. This is dehumanization, or educator existential oppression.

Neoliberal education's agenda of power and conformity. Kincheloe (2011) wrote a great deal about the hegemonic forces that governments in democratic societies employ to anesthetize their citizens for compliance, particularly through the use of technology and the media in contemporary culture. The 21st century public is constantly and consistently bombarded with news and popular information intended for their mass consumption, rendering independent thinking and choosing unnecessary in day-to-day affairs. That which is understood and internalized by the public as socially, politically, and economically desirable constitutes the standard to which the crowd will aspire and, therefore, justify their goals and actions. "What this means in everyday life, of course, is the ability of power to produce meaning in ways that move people to adopt particular behaviors that are in the interests of the power wielders" (Kincheloe, 2011, pp. 239–240). In this way, two goals are accomplished: (a) maintenance of power for the controlling governmental body, and (b) the indoctrination of conformist behaviors across the mass of society. For the purpose of this discussion, we are considering the hegemonic power of the neoliberal educational regime and its effective indoctrination of conformist behaviors

across the American institution of education, most evident in the conformist behaviors demanded of students and school personnel at all levels. In existentialist terms, we are talking about the successful indoctrination of the herd mentality, referred to as the mentality of the "crowd" by Kierkegaard (as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 32) and as the "Herd-Instinct" by Nietzsche (as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 68). In effect, the herd mentality renders notions of individual subjectivity and personhood unnecessary and, in fact, undesirable in the eyes of those in power.

Under the conditions of hegemonic power described by Kincheloe, a pedagogy of personhood is made obsolete, posing a clear threat to the existential development of the individual educator now and into the future. Underscoring the problem of educator existential oppression, Kincheloe's argument asserts that the success of hegemonic power rests in its purposeful and systematic demeaning and objectification of people, thereby promoting within us (as compliant members of the herd or crowd) a sense of alienation "from our own selves, our erotic, passionate, loving, interactive selfhood" (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 241). Whether we use the language of ideological management or hegemony, the effects are the same: submerged or eroding connections to one's subjective self as a consequence of institutionalized existential oppression which, in the end, amounts to a process of dehumanization. Finally, the following quote by Ayers (2011) illustratively contributes to a picture of the educator's situation of existential deprivation, providing a concise and astute analysis of the oppressed teacher's daily experiences in this educational environment.

Schools and school systems turn teachers into clerks. Curriculum is the product of someone else's thought, knowledge, experience, and imagination. It becomes the package developed somewhere out there. The teacher takes the package and hands it on to the students. Everyone is passive, everyone a consumer, everyone deficient and dependent. (Ayers, 2011, pp. 99–100)

Opposing neoliberal education with advocacy for the arts and humanities.

Ravitch lends both scholarly and political weight to arguments opposing NCLB, privatization of American education, and the charter school movement in that she was initially an advocate of neoliberal legislation and worked on its behalf before changing course. As "assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush and [later] appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board under President Bill Clinton" (Russom, 2010, para. 11), Ravitch was well positioned to observe and assess the design, implementation, and outcomes of NCLB legislation. Over time, her thinking evolved in an opposite direction, an event which Ravitch chronicled in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*.

The book critiques the NCLB mindset, in which schools function as businesses and competition is valued over collaboration [and] chronicles how school districts . . . are undergoing the "shocks" of heavy-handed market reformers using corporate models to "discipline" their teachers. (Russom, 2010, para. 12)

Ravitch's current stance on 21st century curriculum, as outlined in a Huffington Post article, calls for a curriculum that holds the arts and humanities in equal measure with the hard disciplines (math, science, and technology). She urges reconsideration of budget cuts in the interest of what "real" education is and should be. "Because of budget

cuts, many schools have less time and resources for the arts, physical education, foreign languages, and other subjects crucial for a *real* [my emphasis, with real inferring "human"] education" (Ravitch, 2013, para 29). Ravitch's conversion from neoliberal apologist to educational humanist suggests an implicitly existential concern for the integrity of educational workers caught in the politics of the neoliberal model. Furthermore, I would suggest that from a philosophical perspective, having chosen to take an alternative stance upon which she, in fact, acted, Ravitch stands out as an example of existential awakening in confrontation with an unacceptable obstacle (neoliberal educational policies), changing course in the direction of "real" education and "real" education workers.

Among the various educational philosophers and scholars of the mid-20th century on into the 21st century, Maxine Greene's work has been uniquely and focally pointed toward advocacy of the arts and humanities as the bedrock of education and as the well-spring of personal and intellectual freedom. From Greene's perspective, the arts and humanities function as the pedagogical foundations from which personhood, for both the teacher and the student, is continually developed and affirmed because confrontations with the arts and intellectual engagement with the humanities require and stimulate the subjective stance of the individual. In other words, the individual's sense of situation and subjective awareness are required for perceiving and making meaning of works of art (visual, literary, musical, dance, theatrical, etc.), as well as for interpreting the past and its implications for the present and the future through the study of history and the social sciences.

> I would want to see one or another art form taught in all pedagogical contexts, because of the way in which aesthetic experiences provide a ground for the questioning that launches sense making and the understanding of what it is to exist in a world. If the arts are given such a central place, and if the disciplines that comprise the humanities are at the core of the curriculum, all kinds of reaching out are likely. (Greene, 1978, p. 166)

Within these same contexts, Greene has consistently written about education from an existential perspective of possibility that correlates to her philosophy of individual "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1978, p. 162), understood as the condition of becoming referenced in an earlier discussion of Freire. As previously stated, the existential process of becoming is nourished by humanizing educational experiences through which the individual's attentiveness to her project of self-creation in the world,is validated and encouraged. "Wide-awakeness has a concreteness; it is related, as the philosopher Alfred Schutz suggests, to being in the world" (Greene, 1978, p. 163). Adapting her existential rendering of wide-awakeness from her study of Alfred Schutz's work, Greene specifically addresses how wide-awakeness might be understood within an existential philosophy of education. For her, it is indelibly connected to notions of personhood, grounded in an essential understanding of education as a uniquely human undertaking; an undertaking through which the individual defines and expresses her awareness of *being* (my emphasis) in the world, as well as her way of teaching (the teacher) and/or learning (the student). To reiterate this point as it relates to Schutz's theory of wide-awakeness, Greene states, "He [Schutz] is also pointing out that human beings define themselves by means of their projects and that wide-awakeness contributes to the creation of the self" (Greene, 1978, p. 163); further, that these projects require the individual's "heightened

consciousness and reflectiveness" (p. 163) as subjects interacting with others, "not in a

withdrawal from the intersubjective world" (p. 163). Thus, with the condition of wide-

awakeness available and engaged on both sides of the teaching/learning process, the roles

of teacher and learner become adaptable and interchangeable amidst the dynamics of

authentic educational experiences.

In sum, Greene's educational contexts for wide-awakeness and the possibilities of

ever-evolving personhood situate individual subjectivity at the center of the educational

endeavor, with the arts and humanities positioned at the core of curriculum. However,

within her philosophy of education, Greene maintains interdisciplinary connections in

which the arts and humanities, having situated the student as a person capable of

independent thinking and meaning making, is better prepared to engage the harder

disciplines (i.e., math, science, and technology).

> The situated person, conscious of his or her freedom, can move outwards to
> empirical study, analytic study, or quantitative study of all kinds. Being grounded,
> he or she will be far less likely to confuse abstraction with concreteness,
> formalized and schematized reality with what is "real." Made aware of the
> multiplicity of possible perspectives, made aware of incompleteness and of a
> human reality to be pursued, the individual may reach "a plane of consciousness
> of highest tension." Difficulties will be created everywhere, and the arts and
> humanities will come into their own. (Greene, 1978, p. 166)

Subjectivity, personhood, and curriculum as conversation. Ayers, (2011)

Pinar (2012), Grumet (1995), and Palmer (1990) also emphasize student and educator

subjectivity in much of their collective works, especially as subjectivity is exercised

through personal reflection and the dialogue that emerges from engagement with

curriculum content; in other words, with the conversations of meaning production that

arise within oneself and with one another as curriculum content is confronted and considered from multiple points of view. Ayers's (2011) vision of educator personhood holds that individual empowerment flourishes through a synthesis of personal introspection coupled with the engagement of social responsibility, concepts that rest in critical, philosophical, democratic, and dialogical methods of teaching and learning. Pinar (2012) and Grumet (1995) subscribe to the conception of curriculum as conversation, encompassing the conversations that take place with the self (personal introspection) and those that take place with others (social responsibility), again reinforcing a view of education as a personal and social process grounded in the interplay of subjective engagement in confrontation with external content. Moreover, Pinar (2012) characterizes curriculum as an existential dialogue of philosophical import, specifically embodied in "that complicated conversation between teachers and students over the past and its meaning for the present as well as what both portend for the future [because] curriculum theory is focused on *educational experience*" (p. 2). On this view, education serves as "our key conveyance *into* the world" (Pinar, 2012, p. 2). In a collection of essays edited by Kincheloe and Steinberg, Grumet (1995) writes that "curriculum is never the text, or the topic, never the method, or the syllabus," but curriculum is "the conversation that makes sense of . . . things" (p. 19). Whether the internal conversation with self, conversations conducted with others, or the conversation that breathes life into curriculum, I contend that all these modes of conversation require the educator's consciousness of self as a unique subject in the classroom, as well as in the world; that the substance of subjectivity is necessary to engage in any and all academic

conversations, including conversations about potential resistance to institutionalized oppression. On this last point, Pinar (2012) emphasizes, "self-knowledge and collective witnessing are complementary projects of subjective and social reconstruction" (p. 47).

Palmer (1990) expands upon a vision of curriculum as conversation, characterizing the exploration and sharing of knowledge as a dialogue of subjectively understood truths (with a lower case "t"), proposed and dissected by individuals invested in the dialogic moment. Underscoring a vision of pedagogy as personhood, Palmer (1990) argues, "truth is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself, that if you want to be 'in truth' **you** [emphasis added] must be in the conversation" (p. 12). Finally, Noddings's (2007) philosophy of care manifests in the mutuality of engaged and caring conversation between the teacher and learner. "[D]ialogue contributes to the growth of cared-fors. . . . care theorists agree with Socrates (and Adler) that an education worthy of the name must help students to examine their own lives and explore the great questions human beings have always asked" (Noddings, 2007, p. 228).

Ultimately, in the most simple of statements on educator personhood, Feldman (2002) reminds us, "the teacher is a person who is being a teacher" (p. 235), that the educator's choice of work is but one expression of her being, her selfhood. Uhl and Stuchul (2011) emphasize the relational dimension of teacher personhood as essential to "teaching as if life matters" (p. xvi). According to Uhl and Stuchul, the teacher's relationship with herself, as a consciously situated and responsible subject, is pivotal to constructive relationship-building with others. Building on Feldman's rendering of person as teacher and Uhl and Stuchul's relationship focus, Smith (2011) portrays

learning as a natural and evolutionary human endeavor that takes place in both informal and formal settings because human development is a fundamentally existential process in which intellectual, emotional, and physical growth can flourish within the individual and across relationships.

> Learning is like physical growth in that it usually occurs without our being aware of it, it is long-lasting, and it requires a nurturing environment. It takes places as a result of social relationships . . . and it pivots on personal identification. (Smith, 2011, p. 385)

Voices: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Critics, and Technology Theorists

Numerous other scholars, cultural commentators, and technology theorists offer diverse perspectives on 21st century values and lifestyles that, directly and indirectly, reflect concerns with the direction in which 21st century education is aimed. In this section, I explore the views of Noam Chomsky, a world-renowned scholar and public intellectual. I follow with discussions of three other individuals, Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle, and Jaron Lanier, whose areas of interests and expertise encompass scholarly research and writing, cultural criticism, and a collective concern with the questionable, negative effects of 21st century technological reliance on the culture at large; further, how this technological reliance reinforces the standardization and objectification measures that undergird the neoliberal educational mission. I aim to show how the individuals selected for this section problematize a culture of technocracy that supports neoliberal educational goals and practices that, in turn, degrade and oppress the existential integrity of the individual who chooses to be a teacher.

Noam Chomsky: On intellectual freedom and humanism in the university.

Noam Chomsky is a highly regarded scholar in linguistics and human cognition, as well as an intellect of impeccable reputation. He has written extensively about a variety of topics, from the realm of academia to the political sphere, with common threads of humanism and social justice weaving through his broad range of work and intellectual interests. In his article, "Paths Taken, Tasks Ahead," Chomsky (2000) writes about the trajectory of university education from the late 1960's to the year 2000, illustrating how the academic institution, traditionally considered the hallmark of intellectual freedom and defender of social justice, has been infiltrated by the oppressive hand of neoliberalism. In the passage that follows, Chomsky not only addresses this situation, but also deconstructs the term "neoliberal" as a misrepresentation.

> The problems are heightened with the expansion of private power in every domain, in the course of the state-corporate social engineering projects of the past several decades. Those projects, designed to shift decision-making authority even further from the public sphere, with all of that sphere's serious deficiencies, to private power, which is unaccountable in principle, are often called neoliberal—a highly misleading term: they are not new, and would have scandalized classical liberals. (Chomsky, 2000, p. 35)

Chomsky (2000) alludes to the responsibility of the university to foster personhood and independent thinking among all its constituents. Incorporating a view of "intellectual history" (Chomsky, 2000, p. 34) as a two-pronged function of inquiry, he explains that intellectual inquiry revolves around "a distinction between inquiry into what the world is and how it works and into how a decent life should be lived" (p. 34). In this statement, we can see both the distinctions and interdependence of the scientific and the

philosophical. This dual approach to inquiry is necessary and, I suggest, predicated on

understandings of personhood as the basis of intellectual inquiry. Whether inquiry is

scientific in design or philosophical in nature, there can be no inquiry without an inquirer.

Moreover, I posit that any kind of inquiry implies the condition of human wonderment,

that philosophical orientation to thinking about the physical world as we can know it and

our respective places in it, the kind of thinking of which only the human individual, as

viable subject, is capable.

Amidst the 21st century emphasis on information access and technological

knowledge production, Chomsky (2000) reminds us that humanism is and should be the

driving force behind all intellectual, scientific, and worldly endeavors. On this view, he

holds the university responsible for retaining its academic and humanistic integrity as a

pedagogical space in which intellectual and personal freedom are extended to all who

inhabit this space, so that inquiry of all kinds and from all corners are valued and

respected.

> Universities should seek to develop the thinking, the ideas, the insights into science and human life, the knowledge and the broad understanding that are needed to help us find our way to a more human future. Pursuit of such goals requires substantial freedom from external pressures. Furthermore, that freedom must be distributed: it is not only for administrators and professors but for all those who take part in the life of the university: students, faculty, staff. That goal may be hard to reach, but it should remain as an ideal to be actively sought. (Chomsky, 2000, pp. 34–35)

From Chomsky's theme of freedom leading to a more equitable and "a more

human future," I turn to the controversial issue of technology in terms of its impact on the

human condition as we know it today and, certainly, as it relates to technology's

ubiquitous presence in neoliberal education.

Nicholas Carr: On what the Internet is doing to our brains. Nicholas Carr

targets the negative effects of technology, specifically Internet use, on human reading

capacities and habits of learning in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to

Our Brains*. Tracing the history of technological innovation, Carr (2010) illustrates how a

particular technological medium, overwhelmingly present in terms of availability and

application across the public landscape, profoundly influences the culture in which it

predominates. He further explains that the human brain changes and adapts to the

dominant medium based on the scientific study of neuroplasticity. "The brain's plasticity

is . . . universal. Virtually all of our neural circuits whether they're involved in feeling,

seeing, hearing, moving, thinking, learning, perceiving, or remembering are subject to

change" (Carr, 2010, p. 26). In essence, the human brain molds to the intellectual

challenges presented, or to the lack thereof. According to Carr, as the predominant

medium of the 21st century, the Internet is a cause for concern regarding a number of

perceived deficiencies in certain areas of brain function that hold severe consequences for

educators and the work of teaching and learning.

Carr is especially concerned about the Internet's impact on contemporary reading

habits, highlighting a decreasing ability and desire to read deeply and with retention. Due

to 21st century habits of multi-tasking, simultaneous browsing/reading of Internet web

sites, and the interruptions imposed by email and Facebook checking, Carr points to the

emergence of human brain adaptations that reduce reading to a skimming process across

the computer screen, resulting in a streamlined, fragmented, and superficial experience of reading; one that is very different from the kind of brain processes required for reading a book with sustained attention and retention.

The negative implications for education and for educator personhood, in terms of pedagogical and existential values, run deeply as computers have become the favored teaching tool of the 21st century. The end effect is the technicization of intellectual development and the dehumanization of teacher personhood, along with a kind of mechanized objectification of student personhood. Students adapt to the depersonalization of their roles as learners and to the depersonalization of the pedagogical relationship very early on in their schooling experiences. Even more problematic, as a result of being schooled or domesticated in this way, students become detached from the deeper existential questions of lived experience as they become more attached to virtual experiences, educational and otherwise, predicated on Internet connections that replace face-to-face interactions with others and the natural world. I suggest, it could be said that existential oppression, as a concept and as lived experience, is foreign to most students today because they have known nothing else. The freedoms they do understand and cherish are those related to connection, to Internet access, to *being* (my emphasis) as a technological experience of living. As the medium of our times, computer and Internet use "mold(s) what we see and how we see it—and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society" (Carr, 2010, p. 3).

Finally, reliance on instructional and testing software programs relegates the educator's role to that of facilitator or manager of technology-driven instruction and testing procedures. In my former role as a school library media specialist who prioritized reading for pleasure as one of my program objectives, I was very clearly impacted by a computer driven reading program, Accelerated Reader, that removed free choice and an intrinsic sense of pleasure from the reading experience for many students. With Accelerated Reader frequently mandated by school administrations, visiting the school library to check out a book became a systematic exercise of book selection based on pre-determined reading levels and point values (as opposed to real interest). This reading experience would then be followed by the students taking a computer answering rote (non-critical) questions on required, follow-up computerized tests. Following is a reflection on my experience with the Accelerated Reader program.

Reflection on a technology-based reading program in the elementary school. As a former media specialist, I witnessed the take-over of technology in both the library and in classrooms. On the elementary level, in particular, computer-based reading programs like Accelerated Reader (required by the majority of school principals at the time) required that students read books from a specific list of so-called "AR" titles and then take computer-generated tests to assess what they "got" from the reading experience. Tests were composed of multiple choice questions based on concrete knowledge of the book (i.e., characters, setting, the story "problem," and ending); no critical or philosophical thinking involved here. Furthermore, students could only choose those AR books that were coded according to their so-called prescribed reading levels and abilities.

As media specialist, I (sometimes with volunteer help) had to label every AR book with its proper code pertaining to its designated reading level, with additional coding information written on the inside of the book cover and color-coded dots affixed to the book spine for identification purposes. In turn, book titles designated for the AR program also had to be identified as Accelerated Reader books in the library's automation system. Adherence to the AR concept of reading skills development meant that a student could not choose to read a book in which she was interested if it was not coded specifically according to her diagnosed reading level. Because the student was limited to book selections in this way, I always felt that her freedom to choose alternative and more challenging titles was denied. As the leader of the school library, I felt that my freedom to resist this kind of manipulated reading design was compromised, as well—by the school administration who mandated the program and by the classroom teachers who relied upon it for their students' reading habits in class. Nonetheless, I resisted the Accelerated Reader program in the two elementary schools in which I worked by not adhering to its strict guidelines. Going further, I de-emphasized and interfiled the AR books with the rest of the library collection in my first school (PES) soon after I arrived there. Prior to my taking over that library's leadership, AR books were shelved in a large section of the library dedicated specifically to those titles. Apparently, my predecessor had no problem running an AR-focused school library and, consequently, that was its most popular section until I came along. That oppressive culture of reading was palpable at first, but with the free rein initially given to me by Mr. H, I made it my goal to encourage students to browse all the library books. I encouraged them to choose at least one other book (in

addition to the required AR title) that was not an AR book; in other words, to choose a

book for an experience of freedom in reading and not linked to test-taking. One final note

on my resistance to the Accelerated Reader program: When I took over the middle school

library, the principal asked me to consider implementing the program there. By

presenting factual information about the AR program (including the associated expenses

and labor that would be involved in purchasing and implementing the program with its

required software, tests, lists, coding procedures, etc.) to the school administrators, along

with my strong reasons for opposing the program, I successfully resisted what I

considered the tyranny of neoliberal technicism upon the student's freedom to read. In

turn, I affirmed my own freedom, as a pro-active educator, to encourage a wide range of

reading experiences without reducing reading to a testing experience.

While the issue of technology may not loom as overtly central to the problem of

educator existential oppression for some, I maintain that it reinforces the neoliberal focus

on standardization, testing, and objectification—objectification of subject matter and

objectification of the teacher and learner. This point has already been made and will

continue to be reinforced throughout this project. I also want to emphasize the idea that

standardized curriculum and standardized tests are made possible and manageable, on a

national scale, through the use of technology as contemporary education's primary

teaching tool and assessment device. Furthermore, and as will be evidenced by the voices

referenced in the following sections, controversial discussions abound regarding the

negative impact wrought by technology on a variety of intellectual and social skills that

manifest in the educational environment, including deficiencies in students' reading and

writing skills; teachers' reliance on rote instructional practices, deferring to Power Point and other technology-driven teaching tools; and obsessive habits involving multitasking and the use of social media. To reiterate, on these and other related points, I submit that the neoliberal educational agenda is well served by a technicist approach that promotes a generally passive, screen-based orientation to teaching and learning. Thus, I submit that a case can be made for the strong connection between technology-based schooling practices and dehumanization of the educator who is compelled to teach and test according to the neoliberal paradigm. With her subjective stance on the line, the educator's particular pedagogical expertise and personal values and ideals are neither welcomed nor affirmed.

Sherry Turkle: Lived versus virtual experience. Sherry Turkle has an extensive background in technology research and innovation. With additional credentials as a licensed clinical psychologist, her work integrates technological concerns with existential concerns. As such, "Professor Turkle writes on the 'subjective side' of people's relationships with technology, especially computers. She is an expert on mobile technology, social networking, and sociable robotics" ("Sherry Turkle," n.d., para. 4). In her most recent book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), Turkle calls into question the values and lifestyle habits associated with our culture's obsession with technology, at times singling out the deleterious effects that technology dependence exacts on young people. She sounds a distinctive alarm about the changing nature of human relationships in the technological

universe; changes that, by extension, echo with alarming implications for education as a

lived and embodied human project.

> [This book] is about how we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face. We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. Teenagers avoid making telephone calls, fearful that they reveal too much. They would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind? (Turkle, 2011, pp. 11–12)

From an existential perspective, a fundamental aspect of Turkle's message is that

the actual *desire* (my emphasis) to be conscious to one's subjective self, as well as to the

messy challenges of real-world personhood, fades against the backdrop of virtually

generated modes of existence and relationship that can be easily, quickly, and

anonymously accessed and experienced mechanistically. In a cultural climate such as

this, I suggest that 21st century identity consciousness might be better understood as an

externally generated state of being, displacing the inwardly sourced self-consciousness of

personal introspection. I further suggest that this situation represents an insidious form of

existential oppression, beyond this project's main topic of educator existential

oppression. Nevertheless, the 21st century educator is not immune from this lifestyle. In

fact, she must engage in it in order to comply with the neoliberal educational agenda.

Therefore, for many people, including the properly indoctrinated educator, technology

dependence is addictive, taking hold of the mind and the body, and threatens the human

capacity to choose and act independently. Based on this context of technologically

induced existential oppression, it is not a big stretch to imagine its power to intensify

practices of standardization and objectification as forces of existential oppression in

education.

  Jaron Lanier: A technology pioneer's concern for the waning self. Along with

Turkle, Jaron Lanier is recognized as an established expert in the field of technology.

Having worked in the computer industry since the 1980s, Lanier's attitudes toward the

use and direction of 21st century technology, in both personal and public life (including

the realm of education), have changed course in ways that express deep concern for the

human condition. In an article published on the website Smithsonian.com (January 2013),

titled "What Turned Jaron Lanier against the Web," Ron Rosenbaum aptly describes

Lanier's change of course.

> Lanier was one of the creators of our current digital reality and now he wants to
> subvert the "hive mind," as the web world's been called, before it engulfs us all,
> destroys political discourse, economic stability, the dignity of personhood and
> leads to "social catastrophe. (Rosenbaum, 2013, para. 2)

In particular, Lanier (2010) targets the proliferation of social networking sites as

agents of depersonalization and dehumanization, supported by a "culture of

technologists" (p. 1). In an article written for *The Chronicle*, "The End of Human

Specialness," Lanier (2010) directly criticizes Facebook.

> Decay in the belief in self is driven not by technology, but by the culture of
> technologists, especially the recent designs of antihuman software like Facebook,
> which almost everyone is living their lives through. Such designs suggest that
> information is a freestanding substance, independent of human experience or
> perspective. As a result, the role of each human shifts from being a special entity
> to being a component of an emerging global computer. (p. 1)

Lanier's warnings about the waning self-speak directly to my concerns about existential oppression in the institution of education. As teachers and professors, if we continue to do the work of education as "waning selves," we are complicit in our own dehumanization and, with that, the dehumanization of our students.

Voices: The Classic Existentialists

Undergirding this study are the voices of classic existential philosophers, including Søren Kierkegaard (passionate commitment), Friedrich Nietzsche (individual empowerment, becoming oneself), and Jean-Paul Sartre (individual freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and responsibility). While individually their philosophical theorizing was not directed at education per se, it is clear to me that Kierkegaard's notion of passionate commitment translates well to a humanizing vision of education that requires investment of the subjective self, representing a commitment to personhood. Nietzsche's emphasis on individual empowerment and individual becoming inspires notions of authentic personhood that would flourish within a humanistic educational model. Moreover, Nietzsche's emphasis on self-empowerment speaks to the existentially oppressed educator's developing awareness of an existential attitude from which she might choose to resist neoliberal domination, as well as potentially seek new possibilities for achieving personal and pedagogical freedom. Sartre's existential conceptions of freedom and *being* (my emphasis) in the world, constituting the individual's fundamental project, are implicit to realizing the educational endeavor as an existential undertaking. Throughout these pages, it will be Sartre's voice that I channel most frequently when discussing existentialism as a philosophical theory of existence that holds real possibilities for the

educator who wishes to resist and/or move beyond her situation of oppression under the neoliberal educational regime.

Methodology

Blending philosophical inquiry, textual analysis, and scholarly personal narrative (SPN) writing, I intend to unite philosophy, personal narrative, and pedagogy specifically through the lens of existentialism. Underscoring my choice of methodology is my commitment to "doing" the kind of existential, philosophical research with which I can unite both my scholarly interests and my personal values; in other words, a methodology that upholds the integrity of my commitment to scholarship with my own existential project of being. The same kind of commitment applies to my evolving teaching practice in that I am consciously and intentionally *in* (my emphasis) my way of teaching existentially, critically, philosophically, and of prime importance, relationally with my students and among my peers. In essence, existential subjectivity is the ground from which my processes of researching, writing, and teaching intersect and reach outward into the world of others.

> Understanding incorporates comprehension but the expertise and the erudition upon which it depends require the cultivation of subjectively situated, historically attuned intellectual judgment. Such judgment is informed by academic knowledge and professional ethics, by technical know-how coupled with a passionate sense of public service, all threaded through the subjectivity of the socially engaged individual. (Pinar, 2012, p. 43)

The nucleus of subjectivity around which existential philosophy revolves is not to be construed as an isolated, self-serving, enclosed space that excludes others, or worldly concerns, or moral considerations of the human condition, especially as subjectivity

impacts educational spaces. In Pinar's (2012) discussion of "subjectivity's significance to the complicated conversation that is the school curriculum" (p. xv), he elaborates on the importance of

> threading one's subjectivity—simultaneously socially structured and historically informed—through academic knowledge to communicate with others . . . Indeed, it is through academic knowledge, I [Pinar] am suggesting, that we find our way *into* the world. (p. xv)

On this understanding, I suggest that it is through my subjectivity, as it informs my study purpose and my methodology, that I can authentically illustrate my pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood, also looking to possibilities for connecting with others—be they students, teachers, administrators, scholars—or some other person who experiences a sense of resonance with this individual's pursuit of her fundamental project.

Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing

Scholarly personal narrative writing (SPN) is a research/writing methodology originated by Dr. Robert J. Nash (University of Vermont). Aligning in many ways to "the narrative tradition of such scholars as Ruth Behar, Jerome Bruner, Kieran Egan, Madeleine Grumet, Richard Rorty, and Jane Tompkins" (Witherell, as cited in Nash 2004, p. vii), SPN retains its own unique characteristics as a narrative genre. Distinct from narrative research methods that interrogate the stories of other individuals in which the researcher looks for common themes, SPN positions the researcher as subject. Nash is very direct about the necessity of researcher subjectivity as it serves the researcher's project and underscores the potential of the project's broader applications.

> What I am advocating, however, takes qualitative research one major step further. SPN puts the *self* of the scholar front and center. The best SPN interview is the scholar's self-interrogation. The best analysis and prescription come out of the scholar's efforts to make narrative sense out of personal experience. (Nash, 2004, p. 18)

At the same time, SPN is distinct from a strict autobiographical account in which the chronology of a life is examined for the purpose of exploring the meanings associated with that particular life. Instead, SPN "writers use their personae in order to explore subject matter other than themselves" (Nash, 2004, p. 28). With SPN, the researcher's narrative is central to the research *process* (my emphasis), thus capturing the process as a personally oriented endeavor, while the larger purpose—specifically, the specified problem—and the larger scope of the study problem remain intact.

> The ultimate intellectual responsibility of the SPN scholar is to find a way to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers; possibly even to challenge and reconstruct older political or educational narratives, if this is an important goal for the researcher. (Nash, 2004, p. 18)

Note: See Appendix A: "Ten Guidelines for the SPN." Here, I explain each of Nash's guidelines and address my approach to each guideline relative to the planning, implementation, and writing of this project.

Responsibility and Authenticity as Scholar/Researcher

My intellectual responsibility is to conduct myself as an ethical and diligent researcher and scholar, such responsibility preceded only by my responsibility to be authentic to my study purpose and to the meanings that I make as they emerge in this work. As consistently stated, my purpose is to illuminate the philosophical problem of

existential oppression in the realm of 21st century education, specifically targeting the situation of the educator. In order to meet my ultimate intellectual responsibility, I intend that the insights achieved through my work, and the ways in which I write about them, will highlight the problem of educator existential oppression in such a way as to "draw larger conclusions for readers; possibly even to challenge and reconstruct older political or educational narratives" (Nash, 2004, p. 18). Nash qualifies this last statement with "if this is an important goal for the researcher" (p. 18). In my multiple roles as scholar, researcher, educator, and philosophical advocate, my intended goal is to create a dissertation worthy of challenging the dominant, neoliberal narrative from the perspective of the existentially oppressed educator; that is, to challenge the neoliberal educational agenda by shining a light on a problem (institutionalized oppression) that is all too frequently suffered in silent compliance and in the darkness of submerged identities. To this end, I position myself as a potential change agent, intent on radically humanizing the situated space of my undergraduate classroom. Philosophically speaking, I choose to leave the darkness of the neoliberal cave and move into the sunlight of self-awareness and social responsibility, a kind of reclamation of my teaching self and a commitment to a certain kind of pedagogical philosophy that has its roots in existentialism.

Finally, the authenticity of my purpose, along with the scholarly work to be produced, rests on my authenticity and integrity as an individual who has experienced existential oppression in the realm of K-12 public education. As one among a multitude of education workers who have experienced or who continue to experience institutional dehumanization on a daily basis, I hope that my voice will resonate beyond the pages on

which I write and will resound with personal validity for others. Ideally, I would hope to awaken existential attitudes of resistance among a few current and future teachers should they read my work. Expanding the cave metaphor further, I offer a quote from Greene (1973) whose words, although written decades ago, echo with particular relevance to my concerns at this present time: "If ever there was a desire to be released from 'sunless caves,' the desire is apparent now. If ever there was a need for sunlit mountaintops, the need exists today" (p. 37). I submit that the sunless caves of neoliberal educational ideology can be excavated—with great challenge and difficulty, and over time, by chipping away at dehumanizing pedagogical practices piece by piece. Through the conscientious efforts of individual teachers who, newly awakened to existential attitudes of resistance grounded in possibility, projects of self-reclamation can be enacted through their commitment to teaching as a pedagogy of personhood. In fact, according to Pinar (2012), "Teachers can express intransigence to this fascist regime by expressing loyalty to the profession, by refusing to teach to the test, by insisting that students engage with ideas and facts critically and with passion through solitary study and classroom deliberation" (p. 10). While I agree wholeheartedly with Pinar, I would also suggest that each individual teacher can choose to create her own authentic path of resistance as it best serves her situation, hopefully within the school building. However, for some, as was the case for me, the choice to leave a particular educational environment in order to advance a pedagogy of personhood might prove to be a necessary response. Regardless of the choices made, from an existential perspective of personal freedom and responsibility

linked to academic freedom and social responsibility, I submit that small steps taken toward possibilities of educator liberation are better than no steps.

Design and Scope of Study

While the academic scope of this work encompasses the theories of classical existential thinkers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, along with 20th century philosophers and educational theorists—highlighting Beauvoir, Fanon, and Freire - I primarily rely on Sartre's theories to serve as the philosophical basis from which to advance a conception of existentialism, via the existential attitude, as a viable response to educator existential oppression. In line with this focus, I apply my understandings and interpretations of Sartrean existential tenets (individual freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and responsibility) to my way of being an educator, researcher, and scholar. Overall, I integrate philosophical inquiry and analysis of existential conceptions of oppression and personhood, along with an exploration of existential philosophical theory, with personal narrative. My purpose behind this integrated design is to make my scholarly process more personally and existentially relevant and accessible to the potential reader. As for the narrative portions in general, personal reflections and commentaries are interspersed throughout the chapters. However, in Chapter IV, "Turning to Existentialism, I specifically use "existential" data, excerpts culled from post-class, reflective field notes that I wrote after each class session taught throughout the spring of 2013, to illustrate the existential tenets or principles addressed in this chapter. To be clear, all narrative portions, and especially the focused inclusion of real-world field

notes in Chapter IV, are intended to illustrate and support the philosophical foundations of this study from both personally subjective and pedagogical perspectives.

Study Dynamics

Interestingly relevant to my personal experience of educator existential oppression and my subsequent move to higher education and the undergraduate classroom, is the fact that the majority of students I currently teach are teacher education majors, required to take the particular foundations of education course that served as my self-study laboratory during spring 2013. Then, and now as instructor of an undergraduate philosophy of education course, I teach my students about education from historical, cultural, philosophical, and social justice perspectives, also bringing the subjectivity of my own lived experiences as a former K-12 educator to our discussions. While I am sensitive to the fact that these future teachers are currently being trained according to the neoliberal educational model (since mainstream teacher education programs are aligned with the standards, goals, and objectives of public education), I embrace the freedom to purposefully position my pedagogical stance in philosophical advocacy and a critical orientation toward the contemporary educational scene.

From the very start of the semester, I explain my teaching philosophy, connecting existential principals to classroom practices that include open and interactive dialogue (seminar-style), emphasis on the student as individual, classroom community-building, and a focus on democratic concepts of social justice, prioritizing respect for both individual voice and multiple perspectives. In this regard, and as a person who has purposefully chosen the work of education, I intentionally project my humanity to my

students through personal story and through consciously extended invitations for meaningful, dialogical interactions—in this way, *being* for myself while also being *for* and *with* (my emphases) my students, individually and communally. The purpose is to "walk my talk," so to speak—an exercise of personal and pedagogical authenticity based on enacting my philosophical pursuit of personhood (for my self and for my students) in the classroom. On this point, I hold close a particular comment made by a student during one of our class meetings, "You actually teach according to what you say you believe!" Finally, I continually explore my own subjectivity within an ongoing process of reflection and analysis of my effectiveness as an educator, along with my personal development as a human being, a process very much reflected across my field notes.

While students are not interviewed or identified in this self-study (as such, not involving other human research subjects nor specific IRB approval), my perceptions of their reactions to me greatly inform my understandings of myself as an educator; as someone intent on teaching and learning who I am in the present, and who I am continuing to become, as a person/scholar/educator. At the same time, I am also intent on awakening students to their own understandings of themselves and their evolving educational philosophies. Are these future teachers concerned, even aware, of existential oppression as a threat to their assumptions or projected ways of being teachers? Or, do these undergraduates disagree with the image of the educator as a marginalized, dehumanized figure within the institution of education? Do they seek empowerment and possibilities for change in education as it is practiced today, or do these future teachers align, unreservedly, with 21st century educational policies and practices? In other words,

the ways in which students respond to me are strong indicators of how neoliberal schooling has impacted them over their previous years of K-12 schooling (along with family and other socio-cultural dynamics that influence childhood and teenage development); as such, implicating a potential disconnect between their understandings of education and mine, their notions of personhood versus mine, their comfort level regarding self-expression versus mine, and their understandings of the human condition versus mine.

As a final note regarding the purpose and dynamics of this study, I want to reiterate that while the focal problem under exploration is what I term educator existential oppression (assumed to be perpetrated from above, within the educational hierarchy of school districts and administrators), students are, obviously, fundamental to the teacher's situation. So, while the educator, as opposed to her students, stands at the center of this study, the interplay between them is crucial since, existentially speaking, the teacher cannot exist as an educator without her students. The phenomenon of educator existential oppression complicates the natural interplay between teachers and students. As will be illustrated in Chapter IV, such complications take on a paradoxical turn when students, themselves, function as both the products and the inadvertent transmitters of the messages of oppression.

Study Recommendations: Limitations and Ongoing Research

An existential study of pedagogy that positions the educator as subject holds important implications for herself and her students. Teaching strategies that emphasize subjective contemplation, personal voice, interactive dialogue, and relationship privilege

a conception of personhood as essential for teachers and students alike. In my view then, teaching from a space of creative and responsible personhood represents a pedagogy of individual freedom, politically expressed through the educator's intended acts of resistance to institutionalized policies that dehumanize the educational experience for both her and her students. I envision such acts of resistance taking place in the teaching environment, first and foremost, through humanistic teaching/learning strategies that will be addressed later in this study. In turn, the student who engages this liberatory space of learning might awaken to her own personhood and potentially choose to resist a culture of oppression that results in conformist attitudes and compliant surrender to peer pressure and other forms of dehumanization in the schooling environment. Note that my use of the term "liberatory space" does not imply or condone a situation of anarchy, disrespect, or violence. Resistance, as I use the term, means staying authentic to one's self, to one's values and beliefs, while navigating the educational situations in which each of us find ourselves.

The limitations of this study revolve around this scholar's particular experience of existential oppression, efforts aimed at reclamation of selfhood, and commitment to a teaching practice based in principles of existentialism. Nonetheless, I continue to assert that my particular experience is not exclusive in conception or in its real-world consequences. From an existential perspective, I understand myself as a unique subject whose lived experiences are mine while, at the same time, suggesting that the revelation of one person's story has the capacity to project existential "truths" recognizable across the greater human story. As such, I suggest that ongoing research is wholly recommended

and applicable to the problem of educator existential oppression in the 21st century. Each educator can choose to question her assumptions about the purpose of education—past and present—along with the role she plays in the educative process. Further, if she is to continue this kind of research, she must examine her own understandings of personhood, identity creation, and empowerment as these concepts inform her life as a private person and a public educator. Finally, I suggest that individual research can expand into collective projects that might challenge the neoliberal status quo beyond the individual classroom, possibly stretching upwards into the school building and the university.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study, *In Pursuit of a Pedagogy of Personhood: Existentialism and Possibilities for Educator Liberation*, is comprised of five chapters. As a personally conceived and designed research study, I aim for both academic rigor and personal subjectivity as essential components of my scholarly efforts; components that, I suggest, would also serve the reader's propensity to interpret and potentially create personal meaning from the information and insights that might emerge from these pages. Following is a brief summation of each chapter.

Chapter I, "Self-Portrait: An Illustration of Educator Existential Oppression" brings into focus, through personal narrative, my story of educator existential oppression, providing necessary background context regarding the 13 years I spent in the realm of K-12 public education, while also laying the groundwork for the philosophical analyses and narrative reflections and field note excerpts to follow in the remaining chapters. Specifically, I describe my experiences across the schools in which I worked, experiences

that speak to a progression of dehumanizing public school policies and practices that culminated in my decision to leave the K-12 setting, to then pursue doctoral studies and a future career in higher education.

Chapter II, "Framing the Study" orients the reader more directly, and with more detail, to the purpose, frameworks, methodology, and contexts of this work. The chapter begins with a restatement of the study problem, followed by a review of selected philosophers, scholars, and cultural and technological theorists who write critically about neoliberal education, directly and indirectly pointing to the attendant problem of educator existential oppression. This critical review is intended to highlight the voices of individuals whose theories support my contention that the neoliberal educational model functions as an oppressive force in the lives of teachers, personally and professionally. I conclude this chapter with an explanation of my selection of an unconventional dissertation methodology that blends philosophical inquiry and analysis with scholarly personal narrative writing (SPN).

In Chapter III, "Existentialist Perspectives on Oppression and Personhood," I present existentialist conceptions of oppression, specifically highlighting the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire, followed by separate and specific discussions of internalized oppression and existential oppression, the latter crystallizing as the focal point of this study. I end the chapter with an existentialist analysis of personhood based on Sartrean theory. The purpose of this chapter is: (a) to convey an understanding of oppression as the process and outcome of dehumanization or negated personhood, typically perpetrated upon the individual or upon groups of individuals by

one or more entities motivated by power and profit; and (b) to solidify an existential

understanding of personhood as the state of being in which affirmation of one's humanity

is based on awareness of one's subjective stance as an individual, also recognizing the

subjective stance of other individuals, as the foundation of human existence. On this

view, the individual (i.e. the individual educator) must first become conscious to her own

existential freedom in order to self-affirm and, then, subsequently affirm her existence in

the social world as a free and viable subject in order to advance her fundamental life

project.

In Chapter IV, "Turning to Existentialism," I explore existentialism as a

humanizing philosophical school of thought that serves as the antithesis of the

dehumanization associated with the policies and practices of neoliberal education. I

demonstrate existentialism's contemporary relevance to the situation of today's educator

and the notion of a pedagogy of personhood by correlating the theories of Kierkegaard,

Nietzsche, Beauvoir, and Sartre, in particular, to excerpts from selected class field notes

intended to illustrate primary existential tenets of individual freedom, subjectivity,

choice, action, and responsibility. Further, I intend the selected field notes to provide

relevant, real-world, pedagogical substance to the theories behind these existential

principles, the idea being to show how theory and practice inform one another in this

instance. Where pertinent, I interject concepts espoused by Fanon and Freire (stemming

from Chapter III's focus on conceptions of oppression and personhood) where they

impart particular meaning and coherence to the scenarios presented. My intention is to

synthesize the previous chapter's discussions of oppression and personhood with this

chapter's illustrative discussion of existential principles, expanded through personal narrative, so as to position existentialism as the antithesis of neoliberal dehumanization and, therefore, a viable response to it. As such, I argue that existentialism serves as a foundation of resistance to oppression by emphasizing the awakening of the "existential attitude" as the essential state of self-consciousness necessary to confront the lived experience of oppression in order to potentially move beyond it.

Chapter V, "Conclusion," is structured around four existential questions that suggest possibilities of self-liberation for the individual educator who chooses to awaken to her existential attitude and pursue a pedagogy of personhood. I respond to these questions with both theoretical and practical considerations using Beauvoir, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre as my primary guides, also including the voice of Van Cleve Morris whose scholarly work provides added insights to the value of existentialism as a philosophy for living and educating. I also advance my own theories of possibility for embracing existential philosophy as a pedagogical philosophy, especially for K-12 educators, but certainly for any educator who conceives of teaching and learning as an undeniably existential process. Finally, in questioning what is at stake for the future of education, the individual, and the human community, I target the concept of integrity as a condition of personal, relational, and worldly wholeness, a condition of being that can only be supported by an existential attitude that understands the necessity of affirming individual personhood for self and others in a state of freedom.

Closing Commentary

> We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do. (Gandhi, in GandhiTopia, post 2, para. 3)

As will regularly be addressed in this study, I posit that individual acts of pedagogical intervention, as exercised by the existentialist educator in the pedagogical space of the classroom or in another teaching/learning setting, can emerge as catalysts for creating increasingly humanistic pedagogical possibilities and realities. While the individual educator cannot overturn a corrupt and ineffectual system of education alone, she can start a movement of change by remaining authentic to her purpose and philosophy of teaching, as evidenced by the humanistic teaching strategies she employs in her daily practice. In this way, she can retain her personal and educational integrity by being responsible and authentic to her pedagogic values. As such, I believe that existentialist ideals emphasizing the centrality of the human individual as self-creator and meaning-maker have much to offer the 21st century educator who has suffered or who continues to suffer from existential oppression, but who has awakened to her own sense of personal subjectivity, responsibility, and potential for self-empowerment. Who better than Sartre to reinforce the notion of possibility emerging from self-empowerment in confrontation with an oppressive situation?

> For it is necessary here to reverse common opinion and on the basis of what it is not, to acknowledge the harshness of a situation or the suffering which it imposes,

both of which are motives for conceiving of another state of affairs in which things would be better for everybody. It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we *decide* that these are unbearable. (Sartre, 1984, p. 561)

Finally, I want to be explicitly and unpretentiously clear that my work is not grounded in narcissism or self-indulgence. I genuinely believe that my story of lost and reclaimed personhood, as an education worker, is all too familiar to a majority of contemporary educators. As such, my narrative does not infer my situation as particularly unique. Rather, the purpose behind my personal narrative—as a particular situation, as an accounting of personal experience interwoven with philosophical analysis—is to impart a real-world, first-person, textual construction of a philosophical/existential problem experienced by many in the field today. Clearly, I claim the veracity of this last statement as a former public school educator, as an observer/witness to other educators' experiences of personhood denied, and as a conversational conspirator in too many dialogues about the present reality of educator existential oppression. Because, or perhaps in spite of all this, I retain an idealistic glimmer of hope that a singular reader might discover relevance, meaning, and the realization that she is not alone in her existential isolation as a teacher in the neoliberal world of education.

CHAPTER III

EXISTENTIALIST PERSPECTIVES ON OPPRESSION AND PERSONHOOD

Chapter Overview

This chapter is dedicated to an existential analysis of oppression and personhood; that is, an existential analysis of how oppression, understood here as a process of dehumanization, the goal of which is objectification of the individual or group, represents the intended negation of the very qualities and freedoms associated with existential conceptions of personhood, more specifically individual subjectivity and the human will to freedom. Highlighting the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Fanon, and Paulo Freire in the section titled "Existentialist Conceptions of Oppression," followed by a related discussion of the phenomenon of internalized oppression, I intend my analyses of their theories to serve as the ground from which to then more explicitly define existential oppression. It is from this vantage point that I intend to justify my claim of educator existential oppression as a real phenomenon of grave import and consequences not only for the educator, but for the very future of public education,

A Composite View of Beauvoir, Fanon, and Freire

This introduction serves as an overview of the more individually focused analyses of existentialist conceptions of oppression soon to follow. Simone de Beauvoir (1976, 2011) addresses oppression from the perspective of a 20th century existentialist in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and as a feminist in *The Second Sex*. Specifically, in *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity, she isolates freedom as that which makes the individual a viable and moral human being; that it is up to the individual "to will freedom" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 78) for the purpose of advancing her project of living, intentionally aiming toward the future in the existential process of becoming. On this point, I suggest that Beauvoir's focus on existential freedom presumes a rational frame of mind from which the individual chooses and acts. This is to say that Beauvoir's moral dimension of freedom presumes that the individual is a rational being who consciously chooses and accepts responsibility for the outcomes of her choices should they, in the end, do harm or good to herself or to anyone else. As such, Beauvoir's free individual is only truly moral when she recognizes and validates not only her own freedom, but also the existential freedom of other individuals in the world. Thus, we can make a case for the notion that choosing and acting to resist oppression is a rational and moral act of freedom. Lastly, while an existentialist notion of morality does not legitimate any prescribed or pre-determined moral code as an essential, given component of human existence, for thinkers like Beauvoir, even Sartre (2007) in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, it is the individual's freedom to *choose* (my emphasis) her moral stance that counts. It is in this sense that I address Beauvoir's theory of freedom as a moral concept, precluding any discussion of what freedom means, morally or otherwise, in the mind of the irrational individual (i.e., the oppressor).

Fanon and Freire use their own unique vocabularies to theorize about oppression, but their individual sensibilities and their ideas about resisting oppression intersect in many instances. Fanon (1963) uses the vocabulary of colonization in his politically charged, descriptive analysis of dehumanization and oppression in *The Wretched of the*

Earth. In this book, he depicts the decimation of a people, its culture, and its national identity as perpetrated by the colonizer over "the other." Fanon advocates the use of violence as the only response to oppression and the only hope for individual and national liberation. Freire's (2012) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* emphasizes the language signified in the book's title as he advocates for a pedagogy of liberation, very much framed around critical and liberatory education as the ground of humanization and recovery from the dehumanizing effects of oppression. In terms of national and international situations of oppression in which whole cultures are at stake, Freire also uses the language of colonization. In such contexts, and similar to Fanon, Freire's calls for critical and liberatory educational practices are also infused with calls for revolution. Whether framed in the binary of oppressor versus oppressed (Freire) or colonizer versus colonized (Fanon), or whether framed as the individual's existential submersion within a situation personally experienced as a negation of her personhood (de Beauvoir), the common denominator among all three is oppression's anti-human practice of objectification, exercised in the interest of the oppressor's desire for power and control over any individual, group, or nation identified as the unworthy other.

Internalized Oppression

As an aspect and potential outcome of oppression's dehumanizing effects upon the individual, I add to the mix a discussion of *internalized oppression*, a psychological term frequently used in contemporary, socio-cultural contexts. Internalized oppression is important to the overall discussion of oppression because the experience or reality of internalized oppression is evidence, in itself, of the effectiveness of oppression's anti-

human objectives. Therefore, the successful inculcation of internalized oppression in the individual or in marginalized groups of individuals reinforces the power of the oppressor group to control others targeted for domination, and it is this reach for power and influence that continues to drive the oppressor group's agenda of dehumanization.

As a psychologically categorized phenomenon, internalized oppression can be understood as the targeted individual's (or targeted group's) acceptance of an identity or role assigned to her by the dominant social order. "When people are targeted, discriminated against, or oppressed over a period of time, they often internalize (believe and make part of their self-image—their internal view of themselves) the myths and misinformation that society communicates to them about their group" (Axner, 2014, para 13). Note that here I am focusing on the individual as opposed to a particular group as a whole. For example, when socially prescribed identities or roles related to race, ethnicity, and gender assign the targeted individual to a minority status within the dominant culture (in essence, discriminating against the individual by denying her full membership status within the dominant community, and thereby denying her value as a complete human being), the individual can experience this situation as a form of self-negating dehumanization; in essence, a self-internalized negation of personhood. In such a situation, the individual acquiesces, possibly even believes, the mythology of her lesser status in the social pecking order, consequently losing connection to any sense of affirmed selfhood and individual identification beyond the externally imposed labels and superficial characteristics to which she has attached. Thus, the mainstream opinion of her marginalized identification becomes her internalized view of herself. The individual then

owns the negative status that has been assigned to her. She has internalized the oppressor's message and, in a way, perpetuates the external ravages of dehumanization internally, within what remains of herself.

Personhood

Any discussion of oppression must entail a discussion of personhood. Oppression cannot emerge, much less succeed, without a subject, a person, to target for dehumanization. Nor can oppression emerge without a person or persons willing to take on the role of oppressor, someone willing to exert his power over others by denying their physical and existential freedoms. In their own ways, the oppressor and the victim each become objectified through this uneven balance of power. The victim of oppression is dehumanized and objectified by the oppressor, while the oppressor, consciously or not, dehumanizes and objectifies himself as he becomes increasingly anesthetized to his anti-human behavior.

Now, I suggest that it is worthwhile to think about who or what a person is in everyday terms, with concepts such as "human being" or "individual" coming to mind. How we automatically use and regard these terms signifies our common use of language, reflecting our taken-for-granted assumptions about human existence without according any philosophical depth to the more ubiquitous meanings applied to such terms. But what *does* (my emphasis) it mean to be or exist in a way that symbolizes the full humanity of subjectively internalized personhood? What does it mean to live as this complex entity, this human being, such that human existence supersedes any possible understanding of what it means to exist as a thing, or an object, or a creature? From the existentialist

perspective, it is this subjective nature of being human, the individual's ability to be

conscious of and make decisions about her uniquely embodied existence in the world,

that constitutes personhood as the definitive expression of one's humanity.

All of the topics briefly addressed in this overview will be more fully addressed in

the remaining sections of this chapter. I now turn to Beauvoir, Fanon, and Freire in order

to consider the phenomenon of oppression in more depth, including its characteristics,

goals, and outcomes as they impact the individual and the human condition itself. To be

clearer, we must consider the phenomenon of oppression as it relates to a lack of

humanity within those who choose/agree to oppress others and the threat to humanity for

those who experience themselves as victims of oppression.

Existentialist Conceptions of Oppression

Simone de Beauvoir

> Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the
> original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify
> his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else. At the
> same time that it requires the realization of concrete ends, of particular projects, it
> requires itself universally. . . . To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are
> one and the same decision. (de Beauvoir, 1976, p. 24)

As a member of the post-World War II, French existentialist group of

philosophers and intellectuals led by Sartre, Beauvoir interpreted existential theory across

the opposing contexts of freedom and oppression, most famously in *The Second Sex* and

in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. As a female intellectual of the 20th century, she stands out in

the highly masculine terrain of male philosophers and theorists linked to existentialism

both directly and indirectly, from Kierkegaard to Sartre himself. And like Sartre,

Beauvoir's writings incorporate a complexity and depth of philosophical analysis that require lengthy contemplation and inquiry. Within this discussion, I purposefully structure Beauvoir's conception of oppression within existentialist frameworks meant to be inclusive of all human beings; frameworks that *should not* (my emphasis) be gendered (although, in the real world of everyday life, gender distinctions are consistently made present) because existentialism is concerned with being, in its most fundamental inception, as pure existence, not essentialized or dichotomized in any way prior to its connection to the world of objects, others, and the social constructions that emerge.

At the same time, the significance of Beauvoir's feminist work contributes greatly to the general discourse around oppression. In particular, her analysis of woman as the "Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 7), intended in her otherness for man as the "One" (p. 7), is illuminating and thought-provoking, inferring dependence and submission by the Other as a conditioned state of existence, almost as if this is a "natural" or "good" kind of oppression intended for the continuation of the species. Questions are asked, questions that complicate the oppression of women as something more fundamental, something secretly and insidiously attached to the idea of being as woman; as such, something more profoundly embodied than a socially constructed, externally imposed label of identification.

> Why do women not contest male sovereignty? No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in woman come from? (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 7)

Beauvoir (2011) structures her analysis of women's oppression in *The Second Sex* around her overarching concern with existential freedom and the "existentialist morality" (p. 16) that emerges from this freedom. In this context, she speaks of the individual as subject, positing ". . . itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; [accomplishing] its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 16). When the individual is prevented from moving forward with her projects of living (or possibly chooses not to assert her freedom in this way), she reverts back to a state of "immanence" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 16), a state of non-movement in which she is no longer a consciousness "for-itself" (Sartre, 1984, p. 119), instead regressing into being an object "in-itself" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 16). This fall from freedom, from transcendence into immanence, becomes a moral issue whether the fall is chosen or perpetrated by another. According to Beauvoir (2011), "this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if the fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil" (p. 16).

Beauvoir continues to speak of the morality of existential freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, reiterating her view that the individual's choice to will her life as a freedom is a moral undertaking, complicated by the unavoidable ambiguity of existence itself. As both interacting and contesting subjects in the world, each of us contributes to the ambiguity of human existence, our unique subjectivities colliding as we attempt to move forward with our projects. Then there is the uncertain and contingent nature of the world itself over which the individual has no control, rendering existence that much more indiscernible and ambiguous. Freedom, however, is not ambiguous. It is not an elusive or

slippery proposition that metamorphoses into something else. Freedom is existence, life being lived as a choice, without artificially imposed constraints put upon one by another, even within such an ambiguous world. Herein lies the paradoxical connection between existential freedom and worldly existence: the clarity and spaciousness of freedom is borne from "this ambiguous reality which is called existence . . . To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 25). Here, Beauvoir presents us with a theory of freedom as the individual's chosen moral stance, providing an ethical foundation of existence. On this view, it is the practice of freedom that advances a conception of personhood as a reaching for human affirmation—for self and, by extension, for others, keeping in mind Sartre's (2007) assertion that when we choose for ourselves, we are also choosing for the other (p. 24) because we recognize, on some level, our mutual stance as subjects ensnared in the ambiguous web of existence. Moreover, it is the practice of freedom as the affirmation of humanity—individually, socially, and politically—that might then humanize an institution, a culture, or a nation. Ultimately then, existential freedom is a concept that is wholly attached to the *being* (my emphasis) that is human in that it must be chosen, expressed, and acted upon in order to be lived.

For Beauvoir, and as will be seen with Fanon and Freire, the dehumanizing structures of oppression represent a human contradiction: humanity denying humanity. On this view, both the oppressor and the oppressed are dehumanized. Yet, it is the person who is oppressed that we naturally label the victim because the active denial of freedom

for that individual is more concretely experienced and witnessed. Moreover, the sacrifice

of freedom on the part of the oppressed individual implicates a state of victimhood

because she has given up her freedom not simply in an abstract sense, but she has, in fact,

lost her right to choose and act as a free and independent person. How the oppressor

experiences dehumanization is a more subtle proposition because power over the other

appears (my emphasis) as a freedom in terms of external control, but actually diminishes

the oppressor's capacity to experience empathy for another as a fellow human being,

ultimately becoming dehumanized or anesthetized to his own more humane impulses.

Whether the oppressed or the oppressor, personhood is negated for both the victim of

oppression and the perpetrator of oppression as they share the common denominator of

dehumanization. "Only man can be an enemy for man; only he can rob him of the

meaning of his acts and his life because it also belongs to him alone to confirm it in its

existence" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 82).

Beauvoir's frame of reference regarding oppression is particularly individual,

personal, and existentially situational, commonly representing scenarios in which one's

personal will to freedom is transgressed by an oppressor. In effect, "they [the oppressors]

are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing" (Beauvoir, 1976, p.

82). Here, the language of freedom and future resonates with highly personal overtones

regarding the individual's ability to imagine and go forward toward a future of her own

creation, while the image of oneself as a *thing* (my emphasis) bespeaks the language of

objectification and oppression. Finally, as will be seen with Fanon and Freire, Beauvoir

clearly advocates resistance to oppression, resistance conceived as either a personal

action or as the response of a group in outright revolt against the oppressor. In her

following commentary on revolt, Beauvoir (1976) includes a most chilling statement

concerning suicide as revolt's ultimate act.

> It [revolt] is fulfilled as freedom only by returning to the positive, that is, by giving itself a content through action, escape, political struggle, revolution. Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory. It resumes its indefinite rapport with itself. There are limited situations where this return to the positive is impossible, where the future is radically blocked off. Revolt can then be achieved only in the definitive rejection of the imposed situation, in suicide. (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 31–32)

When revolt results in liberation, I envision creative disruption, the future opening

up once again with new possibilities. The significance of being a subject, being a person,

is restored. Projects continue, albeit always in confrontation with the uncertainties and

contingencies of life, while the human will to freedom redirects its propelling force in

forward movement. It is a movement of meaning making, exerted through choice and

action, imbuing the ambiguity of existence with significance for the individual whose

humanity is recovered and whose personhood is reaffirmed, most significantly by herself.

But what of Beauvoir's recommendation of suicide as "the definitive rejection of

the imposed situation?" What kinds of resistance, acts of revolt can the oppressed

educator take up in her quest for personal and pedagogical liberation? What would

constitute the educator's "definitive rejection" of oppressive neoliberal educational

policies and practices? If acts of resistance should result in certain positive changes in

K-12 schooling, offering some degree of liberation, what existential signification might

be restored to the pedagogical pursuit of personhood? If human existence is ambiguous,

does it follow that human education is also ambiguous? Or, is education like freedom, a

moral good in and of itself?

Frantz Fanon

> The sweeping, leveling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contributed to this cultural obliteration. (Fanon, 1963, p. 170)

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon exposes the horrific reality of oppression as

a systematic process of dehumanization in which people and their culture are existentially

(the people) and physically (the culture and the nation) decimated under the weight of

colonization. From Fanon's studied perspective as a psychiatrist and philosopher, as well

as from his experience of working in support of Algeria's struggle for independence from

France during the 1950s, he characterizes colonization as a phenomenon marked by

extreme violence that is typically forced upon less developed Third World nations by

more economically powerful and technologically sophisticated Western nations. His

first-hand experiences with the dehumanizing effects of colonization upon oppressed

individuals, their communities, and their entire way of life propelled his radical stance

advocating violence to overthrow the oppressor. Fanon justifies his advocacy of violent

revolution as the only means by which the people and the nation can recover from

oppression's enslavement; a paradoxical proposition in that, on this view, the people must

liberate themselves through violence so that they might then recover their own humanity

and, with it, their own moral compass. According to Fanon, because the oppressor mind

is irrational and inhuman itself "colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon, 1963, p. 23). Once again, in terms of the use of violence, we have the contradiction of humanity denying humanity, noted earlier in the discussion of Beauvoir's theories on oppression. Is it possible to say, then, that irrational behavior (i.e., violence) is justified on the part of the oppressed because it is enacted in the name of freedom? How does Fanon's point of view on the use of violence against the oppressor complicate Beauvoir's contention that acting on and for freedom is a moral proposition grounded in the belief that, as rational individuals who cherish freedom, we would choose for others that which we would choose for ourselves? If our notions of rational thinking and behavior are based on the higher qualities of human empathy and commitment to social justice, and our notions of irrational thinking and behavior are seen as encompassing qualities that are anti-human, we are left with the perplexing dilemma of deciding under what conditions violence can be justified.

Fanon prioritizes human freedom and personhood above all else. Therefore, with Beauvoir's existential freedom poised as the moral ground of human existence, and with Fanon's estimation of the oppressor as inhuman and irrational, the pursuit of freedom becomes the justification for acts of violence on the part of the oppressed population. In fact, I submit that Fanon would claim that this kind of violence, purposed toward the reclamation of personhood and freedom, is a moral act, not to be compared with the violent and dehumanizing tactics perpetrated by the oppressor across the human landscape and the cultural fabric of a victimized society. According to Fanon, oppressor

violence destroys homes and businesses; it rapes the land as well as its people, literally and figuratively; it dehumanizes the colonized individual, peeling away personhood, layer by layer, through its disregard of independent thought and choice, as well as its denial of independent expression of critical points of view, until there is nothing left but a shell of a human being. Oppression is violent in that it obliterates a culture and tears apart the social fabric and familiar "normalcy" of everyday life; that is, life lived as freedom before colonization.

One might ask how the violence of colonization is successfully transmitted into the everyday? How is a system predicated on dehumanizing practices of manipulation and control implemented so that it successfully permeates a way of life to the point that it is able to conquer and take control of it? Are there systematic phases of dehumanization that prepare the ground of negated personhood for docility and domestication? What is the first phase of colonization's dehumanization process? What gets eradicated first, personhood or the representations of personhood that constitute a culture? In a way, it makes sense to imagine that the symbols, customs, and familiar trappings of a culture would be decimated at the start, so that the colonized individual would initially undergo a separation between herself and her familiar way of life. From here, one could imagine, with the regularity of enforced limitations on personal freedom, the separation of self from one's own consciousness of being a subject in her own right, as dehumanization of the mind and soul set in more deeply. This dual experience of separation—from a way of life and from oneself—speaks to the experience of alienation. As explained by Fromm (1961), "Alienation (or "estrangement") means, for Marx, that man does not experience

himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him" (para. 2). Certainly, the oppressor represents an unwelcome, alien force that that seeks to degrade the security, confidence, and the integrity of wholeness upon which freedom and personhood depend.

On the other hand, it is also possible to imagine that a specific ordering of events in the process of oppression can be somewhat arbitrary in that the individual, as a uniquely subjective being, will internalize dehumanization in ways that are especially particular to her way of making meaning of the assaults on her freedom. Thus, on the surface of things, while it makes sense that physical oppression—for instance, the taking away of one's land, one's home and possessions, and one's ability to move around freely—serves as an initial, concrete step in the dehumanization process, it does not necessarily result in the immediate stripping away of the colonized individual's unique inwardness, her self-possession and self-understandings as a particular person. If such be the case for a few or many newly colonized individuals, the process of dehumanization must continue in order to effectively negate those qualities or characteristics that we associate with intact personhood; again, self-awareness, independent thinking, choice, agency, freedom of movement, and freedom to self-express. The colonized individual must be rendered a *thing* through the removal of all aspects of life that contribute to the shaping of identity and the affirmation of personhood. Thus, to obliterate a culture is to destroy and replace its norms, practices, customs, symbols, art, and daily way of life with something alien. To obliterate personhood is to negate the human qualities and

characteristics that flourish in a state of freedom. In both scenarios, oppression is to be understood as anti-human.

Fanon (1963) describes the colonized world as a "Manichaean world" (p. 6) of concrete duality; that is, a "compartmentalized world" (p. 5), "divided in two [and] inhabited by different species" (p. 5). Here, Fanon is not talking about humans versus animals; rather, he is talking about race. "Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to" (p. 5). Fanon's use of language, equating species with race, magnifies a colonial attitude of white superiority over people of color, a long-standing construct of dehumanization. Using these terms, if race is now to be regarded as a species, and the species of the colonizer is supreme, then the colonized person is categorized as a species that is "less than," lower than human so as to be regarded a creature, if not quite yet a thing. On this view, the colonization process can also be understood as a taming process in which the oppressed are trained, like animals to obey, conform, and take on the outsider culture over time.

Nonetheless, while the colonizer's taming process is intended to exert control and to effectively domesticate the oppressed, Fanon claims that full conversion to sub-human status is not typically internalized in the mind and soul of *his* (Fanon's) colonized individual. This is because, despite appearances of successful domination, Fanon maintains that the colonized person continues to perceive the colonizer as outsider, the foreigner, the interloper, the ultimate representation of an anti-human species. Thus, it is very important to understand that, on Fanon's rendering of the colonized mind, the

oppressor or colonizer comes to represent that which is inhuman, and not the other way

around.

> In the colonies the foreigner imposed himself using his cannons and machines. Despite the success of his pacification, in spite of his appropriation, the colonist always remains a foreigner. It is not the factories, the estates, or the bank account which primarily characterize the "ruling class." The ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere, different from the indigenous population, "the others." (Fanon, 1963, p. 5)

So it is on this view of the colonized as "dominated but not domesticated" (Fanon,

1963, p. 16) that Fanon places his hopes for liberation and his belief in violent resistance

as the only viable means by which the colonized masses can recover themselves and their

nation status. Although marginalized and dehumanized, Fanon holds to the idea that

within the colonized individual, there lurks a spark of violently human inspiration waiting

to be ignited. "The muscles of the colonized are always tensed. . . . he is always ready to

change his role as game for that of hunter. The colonized subject is a persecuted man who

is forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor" (Fanon, 1963, p. 16). Finally, for Fanon,

the fundamental understanding that dehumanization is the ultimate reality of everyday

life under an oppressive, colonial regime signifies his ultimate justification for the taking

up of arms by the oppressed. Once again, we have the ironic situation of justifying

violence for a humanitarian cause, that cause being the reclamation of individual

personhood and the restoration of a human community committed to social justice and

freedom. Again, this reasoning rests not simply in Fanon's advocacy of violence as the

only possible response to oppression, but in an even more profound and incredulous way,

in his belief that the colonized people of the Third World somehow continue to retain a

glimmer of their own inner humanness amidst dehumanizing conditions. Perhaps it is this

mixture of the colonized individual's unextinguished glimmer of humanity confronted

with the darkness of dehumanization that makes it possible for him to resist oppression

with isolated, chosen acts of violence for the sake of a more permanent vision of

freedom.

> After years of unreality, after wallowing in the most extraordinary phantasms, the colonized subject, machine gun at the ready, finally confronts the only force which challenges his very being: colonialism. . . . The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation. (Fanon, 1963, pp. 20–21)

Still, self-recovery and national liberation do not assure a return to the way things

were before colonization. The formerly oppressed/newly liberated individual (and

nation) most likely cannot return to what was. Fanon addresses this when he talks about

the potential of revitalizing a culture that has been severely damaged, if not decimated,

through the experience of colonization and the struggle toward liberation. In other words,

and from the existentialist perspective, an alternative project must be chosen in the

movement of going forward. This is to be done in the name of a new day, a new way of

being in the world. No longer colonized, but not who they were before colonization, the

people must recreate themselves. Having experienced what it is to live as a creature or a

thing, the newly liberated must become who they will be anew, in tandem with their new

project of freedom. Likewise, a colonized cultural landscape cannot duplicate its prior

essence, what it was before the ravaging of its very way of life. Instead, a new culture

must be forged. "The liberation struggle does not restore to national culture its former

values and configurations. This struggle, which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people's culture" (Fanon, 1963, p. 178).

With liberation at hand, Fanon focuses on the importance of forging a national consciousness with which a new culture of humanity can be born and nourished. Because a genuine struggle for liberation enlists the hearts, souls, minds, and bodies of those fighting for their humanity and their freedom, this new culture of humanity can take on greater significance as a creative force for bonding people together not only during their initial time of triumph, but also throughout their efforts to symbolize and manifest their cultural ideals in congruence with their national identity as a freedom-loving people. "We believe that the future of culture and the richness of a national culture are also based on the same values that inspired the struggle for freedom" (Fanon, 1963, p. 179).

How might this discussion of colonization translate to the world of American education in the 21st century? Does the neoliberal educational system fit the role of colonizer with its imposition of standardizing "laws" that compromise teachers' freedom to be individuals who choose to teach? As domesticated, colonized workers, are teachers simply trained to perform for the advancement of the colonizer's goals and, yet, still held personally accountable for their production levels? Is the realm of education compartmentalized in such a way that the masses who occupy the school buildings are maintained as a separate species, looked upon as inferior by the colonizer species of neoliberal legislators in their positions of power? Has school culture been co-opted by colonization's mandated rules of compliance and conformity to such an extent that

"individual creativity," "independent thinking," and "academic freedom" are slogans of a bygone school culture? Finally, what kind of liberatory praxis can teachers undertake to liberate themselves and to re-humanize school culture? I ask these questions because I think teacher liberation is possible, whether it be the liberation of one teacher at a time or a collective of teachers advancing a liberatory praxis focused on a broader scale. Certainly, I am not suggesting that we can or should overthrow an entire school system. I am not in favor of violent revolution. However, I am suggesting an existential revolution that starts with the individual teacher, exploring possibilities regarding how she might choose to advance her project of personal and academic freedom in the classroom. I suggest that she can choose to start with a declaration of freedom that validates the individual interests and learning styles of each student; that she can choose to declare the centrality of classroom dialogue as the basis of relationship-building; and that, on all these points, she must assert her commitment to a pedagogy of personhood through which she chooses to teach humanistically and creatively, discarding whenever possible the standardizing pedagogical practices of neoliberal education.

In essence, if we are to liberate education, we must liberate ourselves first. I do not wish to be read as simplistic here, for I am only talking about possibilities that might speak to, first and foremost, liberation of self as an inward reclamation of personhood. This inwardly focused liberation speaks to the existential attitude of self-consciousness from which a newly found sense of agency can emerge. This is a liberatory attitude that seeks to move beyond the futility and despair of powerlessness and hopelessness; to be able to envision some kind of future, to be able to grasp onto an image of something

better than life as the experience of endless alienation; that is, alienation from the oppressive system at hand and from the self. When I left the public school system, I was not suddenly liberated in terms of conquering the oppressor. Rather, I released myself from an inwardly experienced situation of personal enslavement over which I felt I had no control, and from which I could envision no positive resolution. While I freed myself from that situation of existential angst, I was still living in close partnership with stress and anxiety, not assured of any next step that I could take to solve the problems associated with my experience of existential oppression in the world of K-12 education.

In fact, I was taking on new problems surrounding my jobless status, financial obligations, and the challenges of a doctoral program. I was alone, self-supporting, and uncertain of the future. But I felt a freedom to *be* (my emphasis) that sustained me as a person, acting on the decision to leave one system of education and committing myself to another, the university, where I hoped that existential and academic freedom might prevail. I could feel like myself again; that is, I felt like a viable human being who could choose and act on my own accord, as opposed to an automaton carrying out a mandate or fulfilling an educational prescription. I believed that I could advance my project of becoming myself as an educator, a prospect inaccessible to me in my state of existential oppression.

Paulo Freire

> Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human. This distortion occurs within history; but it is not an historical vocation. . . . This struggle [for humanization] is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given

destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed. (Freire, 2000, p. 44)

For Freire, oppression—whether evidenced in strident nationalism, twisted notions of racial superiority, gender inequality, cultural decimation, economic disparity, or educational despotism—is a process of dehumanization that serves to negate, as opposed to affirm, personhood. "For the oppressors, 'human beings' refers only to themselves; other people are 'things.' . . . the existence of the oppressed is necessary to their own existence" (Freire, 2000, pp. 57–58). At the same time, Freire declares that the singular "vocation" of the individual is to become more human, calling to mind Beauvoir's talk of forward movement being the individual's project of freedom. If becoming more human is our primary existential task as free individuals, then re-humanization is the primary task for those who are or have been oppressed. Furthermore, Freire places the responsibility of rehumanization, for those who are oppressed *and* for their oppressors, in the hands of the former because, "Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both" (Freire, 2000, p. 44). In essence, the oppressed must liberate themselves first and, with that, achieve a kind of liberation for their former oppressors. In a way, this stance resonates with Fanon's call for the colonized to take up arms against the colonizer in terms of taking responsibility for their own liberation. However, Fanon does not put responsibility for the oppressor's liberation in the hands of the oppressed, as Freire symbolically implies in the prior quotation. Therefore, we must ask, "How would Freire have the oppressed liberate themselves, rehumanize their way of life, and potentially free the oppressor?

Freire (2000) emphasizes "praxis" (p. 45) as the path to liberation: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Such praxis requires the development of what Freire (2000) terms "conscientization" (p. 74), the critical awareness of one's social reality so that the individual is able to use her reflective capacities to choose and act for the cause of freedom and positive social transformation. Thus, the notion of acting upon the world in order to transform it can encompass a multitude of possibilities: from going on strike, to verbal resistance, to physical resistance, to actual revolution. It can entail concern for others, for the environment, and for a variety of social justice issues.

More specifically, however, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed demands that those who are, themselves, oppressed wake up to a critical understanding of their particular situations of dehumanization, hearkening closely to the notion of awakening to one's existential attitude of self-awareness, resistance, and possibility in confrontation with an oppressive situation. For Freire, such an existentially critical self-awakening can best be accomplished through dialogical and reflective strategies that ultimately inspire, and dictate the individual's choice to be responsible for her own liberation. "This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade" (Freire, 2000, p. 48). In other words, the oppressed must *learn* (my emphasis) why and how to pursue freedom, humanization, and the recovery of personhood. Real liberation does not stop at physical freedom, but is based in the deeper knowing of existential liberation as freedom

of mind and spirit. As such, resistance must be a reflective act that speaks to the body, mind, and spirit.

The significance of a critical educational process cannot be overstated here. It must also be understood that critical education is political education; so, whether working with adult peasants in the fields of Brazil or with grade school students in an inner city American school, education is the key to cultivating humanity and executing a praxis of freedom. What does a critical educational process look like? Regardless of the physical setting, critical education is what Freire (2000) calls "problem posing" (p. 84) education, whereby critical and creative dialogue between teachers and students inspire heightened consciousness of one's reality in the world, provoking ongoing questions that often challenge old assumptions and the consideration of new possibilities. Independent thinking is stimulated in problem posing education because each participant in this process is aroused to reflect upon the given reality and consider alternatives that might advance the cause of humanization for herself and for her community.

Further, problem posing education is Freire's antidote to the traditional banking concept of education in which students are regarded as empty containers needing/waiting to be filled. The dehumanizing nature of the banking model positions students as objects, while the teacher is positioned as the so-called subject or lone authority figure in the classroom. Yet, as Freire consistently points out, the teacher is also dehumanized in the banking model conception of education because she is required to submerge her personhood in order to play the role of information giver and test administrator, herself controlled by a system that mandates how, what, and when she will teach. This is the

typical scenario of unfreedom in the contemporary, neoliberal classroom, and it begs the intervention of problem posing education as liberatory practice. "Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (Freire, 2000, p. 84). In line with privileging human creativity and authenticity as essential to the teaching/learning process, problem-posing education speaks to Freire's (2000) existentialist orientation, particularly apparent when he discusses the human process of "becoming" (p. 84), a concept historically embraced by existentialist thinkers.. As a critically reflective and active educational process, problem posing "affirms men and women as beings" (p. 84), as free and moral persons who ". . . know themselves to be unfinished" (p. 84). Thus, for Freire, becoming and unfinishedness are two sides of the same coin, symbolizing the ongoing possibilities available to the individual who affirms her existence as a choosing and acting subject in the world. As such, becoming is not only a hallmark of an existentialist conception of personhood, it is also a hallmark of a humanizing educational process that has no end in itself. "Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis" (Freire, 2000, p. 84).

Essentially, Freire's conception of oppression, as a process of dehumanization or negation of personhood, correlates to the ideas expressed by Beauvoir and Fanon. Based on my interpretations, I suggest all three would agree that, in the eyes of the oppressor/colonizer, the oppressed individual or group is regarded as sub-human and treated accordingly, relegated to the status of an animal or a thing as opposed to being

affirmed as an equal human being. All three advocate acts of resistance, even revolution,

for the cause of liberation. Fanon's call for collective violence resonates as the most

extreme, but Beauvoir recommends revolt against oppressive forces, as well, and goes so

far as to recommend suicide for the oppressed individual when all best efforts fail to

achieve liberation. Freire also calls for revolution as an ultimate necessity in particular

situations, but he saves his strongest arguments for his advocacy of critical pedagogy as

the highest and best liberatory tool available to humankind. Finally, whether inferred or

explicitly expressed (as in the case of Beauvoir), existential freedom is a moral freedom

that affirms personhood. Oppression, as the negation of personhood, is thus deemed

immoral.

Internalized Oppression

Historical and Social Constructs

Internalized oppression speaks to an inwardly experienced adaptation to an

oppressive situation in which the targeted individual either identifies with the oppressor

and the oppressor culture, or she believes the oppressor's narrative about her inferior

status. In the latter scenario, the oppressed individual does not necessarily identify with

the oppressor, but she accepts and owns the oppressor's evaluation of her being as other,

as less than, as differently deficient, as someone who does not quite belong to the

community of acceptable persons. Across both scenarios, internalized oppression can

clearly be associated with large-scale, historical projects of dehumanization such as the

institution of slavery in the southern United States prior to the Civil War or the Holocaust

of the 20th century, two formidable examples among a plethora of historical moments of

oppression and domination. These same scenarios also pertain to more narrow, contemporized contexts in which internalized oppression is often associated with the individual's marginalized social status, often based on personal qualities (physical, intellectual, psychological, socio-economic, heritage, etc.) that do not measure up to the socio-cultural norms equated with mainstream society's definitions and standards.

The more current literature about internalized oppression (Osajima, 1989; Rosenwasser, 2002; Wendell, 1990) typically focuses on groups routinely accorded minority status within the greater society according to race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliations, etc. In his article, "Internalized Oppression and the Culture of Silence: Rethinking the Stereotype of the Quiet Asian-American Student," Osajima (1989) argues that the quiet and non-assertive behavior typically associated with Asian-American students is actually the silent manifestation of internalized oppression linked "to the dynamics of oppression they face as students and as members of a racial minority group" (p. 153). Rosenwasser (2002) studies Jewish women's internalized anti-Semitism as a form of internalized oppression in her article, "Exploring Internalized Oppression and Healing Strategies," posing the following focal question, "How does internalized Jewish oppression manifest in us, and what are strategies for resisting and healing from this oppression?" (Rosenwasser, 2002, p. 53). In her article, "Oppression and Victimization; Choice and Responsibility," Wendell (1990) addresses internalized oppression as it correlates to "a cluster of problems for feminist theory and practice which concern responsibility and choice under conditions of oppression" (p. 16). As represented by these three articles, socially marginalized individuals or groups feel themselves to be

disassociated, in varying degrees, from mainstream culture, from the master narrative of a socially "correct" way of life. While the external realities may not overtly testify to a picture of oppression, the individual suffering from internalized oppression yet experiences a kind of psychic dehumanization and a distinct sense of alienation as *other*, separated and isolated from the dominant culture in her situation of difference.

Philosophical Constructs: Fanon, Freire, and Beauvoir

In their own ways and within their more heightened discussions of oppression across historical, national, and international contexts, I want to suggest that Fanon and Freire speak to the phenomenon of internalized oppression as an alternative self-identification process resulting from the overt infliction of oppression upon the individual's physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional being. Following are illustrations of how each of these philosophers incorporates a rendering of internalized oppression—the psychological effect of dehumanization—as being an issue, or not, within certain oppressed individuals or groups.

Fanon presents two pictures of the colonized in his discussion of the affective nature of oppression. First, he illustrates the case of people who are physically and culturally oppressed, but who are yet self-possessed within the situation of oppression. They are not physically free. They are victims of dehumanization, but they have not lost themselves to an alternative self-identification. Therefore, they have not internalized oppression in terms of identifying with the oppressor. Ironically, and in contrast to this picture of the self-possessed colonized individual, the colonizer's common tactic of reducing (in his own eyes) the colonized person to the status of an animal or thing blurs

his vision of what being human means, in a sense enabling and strengthening his

capacity to further dehumanize others as he becomes less human himself. Nonetheless,

Fanon emphasizes that among the colonized masses, there are many who retain past

memory, present knowledge, and clear vision as persons of value and moral purpose.

According to Fanon, these colonized people know that they are seen as animals in the

narrowness of the colonizers' eyes, but they see themselves with the truth of who they

are, remaining aware of what they must do to regain their freedom.

> The colonized know all that and roar with laughter every time they hear
> themselves called an animal by the other. For they know they are not animals.
> And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen
> their weapons to secure its victory. (Fanon, 1963, p. 8)

In a different kind of portrait of the colonized individual, Fanon (1963) illustrates

the case of the "colonized intellectual" (p. 13) whose skewed personal identification, I

propose, symbolizes a state of internalized oppression. This colonized subject chooses to

identify with the oppressor even though he retains ties with the common people who

remain physically oppressed. "In order to assimilate the culture of the oppressor and

venture into his fold, the colonized subject has had to pawn some of his own intellectual

possessions" (Fanon, 1963, p. 13). In a sense, the colonized intellectual is a split identity

because he internalizes much of the oppressor's way of behaving and thinking while he

still retains a sense of membership among the people. In this way, he is "constantly at risk

of becoming a demagogue" (Fanon, 1963, p. 13) because he lives in existential

compromise in terms of moral purpose and values. In this sense, the colonized

intellectual might even be considered less free than the others because he does not know

who he is or to whom his allegiance belongs. He is still oppressed by the oppressors, even if it is, ostensibly, to a lesser degree than his countrymen. At the same time, he remains internally oppressed by his own complicit actions.

Freire very directly addresses what I understand as the two sides of internalized oppression, although he does not use this term specifically. First, with regard to the tendency of the oppressed to identify with the oppressor, Freire connects this tendency to the state of alienation that envelops the oppressed individual so that, once again, with the integrity of personhood torn to existential shreds, the individual reaches for an alternative self with which to connect. At this vulnerable stage of dehumanization, the privilege of the oppressor and the oppressor's way of life looms as far more appealing than the status quo.

> Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the "eminent" men and women of the upper class. (Freire, 2000, p. 62)

Freire (2000) characterizes the other side of internalized oppression, having to do with *owning* (my emphasis) the negative qualities attributed to the oppressed by the oppressor, as "self-depreciation" (p. 63); what we more commonly refer to as self-deprecation. On this point, I suggest that continuous assaults upon the individual's sense of self, self here representing that integrated inner knowing of one's value and purpose as a particular subject in the world, can be more damaging, in a permanent sense, than physical assaults upon the body. In essence, to be repeatedly told and treated as if you

have no value speaks to a strategy of dehumanization in which an ongoing process of psychic wounding occurs, not allowing for healing on its own. This kind of internalized oppression is a wound inflicted on the soul, and the kind of intervention needed for soul healing would likely require much time and personal work.

Finally, and to give Beauvoir her due, I suggest that identification with the oppressor would be explained not only as the result of dehumanization, but also as an act (whether consciously chosen or passively committed) of "bad faith" (Sartre, 2007, p. 25) because the oppressed individual has contributed to the negation of her own personhood by accepting the words and opinions of the other. This existentialist perspective sounds harsh, and I think that it is. However, the fundamental premise behind it is that, at some point along the path of oppression, some individuals awaken to a critical consciousness of their situations. For these individuals, there is no other option but to choose freedom, even if that freedom can only be experienced, initially, as an inward affirmation of personhood that also resonates as an existential attitude of potential resistance. Even if there is not a clear solution at hand, a choice has been made to know oneself, anew, as a viable, moral, and choosing person. Beauvoir would likely state that the intentional act of choosing oneself is an act of existential freedom, but that true revolt must follow in whatever form necessary and doable, although I would like to exclude her option of suicide as one of the options here. Nevertheless, I suggest that Fanon, Freire, and Beauvoir would agree that the very idea of freedom consciously chosen is the necessary initial step toward reviving the individual's inward affirmation of personhood, an

affirmation that can ultimately serve to demystify internalized oppression, defy dehumanization, and restore to the individual her existential integrity.

Family Constructs

I have considered internalized oppression in historical and contemporary social contexts, and I have explored the philosophical constructs of internalized oppression via the theories of Fanon, Freire, and Beauvoir. What about the possibility of internalized oppression as a psychological phenomenon related to family dynamics, dynamics that can range from benign ignorance to the dysfunctional effects of childhood grooming with its strategies of objectification and labeling, even to the extremes of various forms of abuse perpetrated within families? I submit that children, adolescents, and teenagers all too often become victims of oppressive family cultures and, thus, internalize the damaging labels and characteristics that brand them before they have even had a chance to create themselves in a space of freedom. How can the child or young person understand the possibilities of existential freedom and choice when she is wholly dependent on the adults in her life to supply her basic needs, as well as familial love and security as she can know such ideals? Moreover, how does the experience of internalized oppression within the structure of the family unit predispose the individual to potential victimization within the oppressive environment of neoliberal education, whether that individual be a student or an adult educator?

Based on my own experiences within a dysfunctional family environment in which the children were externally identified and labeled (even so-called "good" or "positive" labels can wreak damaging effects on a child who is told who she is, and how

she should present herself to the world), I can say that the child is an unwitting victim. With unusual exceptions, the child cannot avoid internalizing the oppressive labeling that attends to the lived experience of objectification and parental manipulation, typically resulting in the submergence of her more natural impulses and instincts. In my case, choosing freedom and recreating identity started much later in life, actually within the more open space of adulthood, and continues to be an ongoing personal project indelibly attached to my working project as a scholar and educator.

      Reflections on childhood objectification and labeling. *During the later years of childhood and more acutely throughout my adolescent and early adult years, I now understand that I existed like a thing, a performing thing that sought approval from those whom I both loved and feared. But I did not start out this way, Actually, from what I have been told and from what I can remember of my very early childhood, I was an independent child, demonstrating natural childhood curiosity and exploring the freedom of play while also manifesting a childhood version of an existential attitude towards life as I could comprehend it. In fact, as a child, I did not realize the extent to which my philosophical/existential attitude, reflected in my propensity to analyze and imagine alternative ways of being in the world, was beating in cadence with my human heart and my intuitive mindset. Nor did I realize how others, from childhood friends to parents and siblings, perceived my habits of inward thinking—relative to my particular interests, questions, conversations, and interactions—as different, perhaps out of sync with their ways of thinking and being, even possibly undesirable.*

"You think too much!" A familiar refrain directed at me—from childhood onward—followed by charges of being "intense," "serious," and, particularly worthy of ridicule in a materialistic and competitive culture, a "professional student." These labels arose from scenarios that allude to the following questions: Why would I stay inside on a summer evening engrossed in a book while some neighborhood children were playing outside? Why did I find peace in hitting a tennis ball against a wall for extended periods of time by myself? Why did I recognize a need to have alone time? Why did I like to take long walks with a special friend and speculate about life? Why was I very consciously caught in a web mediating between my need to be true to a particular inner life and my need to be considered popular and in step with the prevailing, peer group mentality? Although I do not recall feeling outrightly insulted by the labeling that signified difference from the dominant group, I do remember always feeling different, set apart— both within the family unit and in social groups. What I am certain of is that I ultimately internalized such labels as negative commentary over time.

To understand labeling as an actual form of dehumanization and oppression within the family structure is a very subtle, but intense proposition that, for some, might prove difficult to accept, For others, it is a reality that can prove to be a lifelong challenge. Regardless, the effects of childhood labeling, even after the passing of many years, can remain pressed upon our adult psyches as continuing reminders of long-held, negative self-concepts and behaviors that continue to manifest in the present (Hudak, 2001). Typically, the experience of internalized oppression that results from the enduring effects of labeling, in order to be dismantled or at least disrupted from within one's

psyche, requires formal professional therapy or possibly other, informal processes of therapeutic value. The point is that mere substitution of a preferred word for the original labeling word does not reduce or change the internalized stamp of identification associated with long-term labeling. This is because labeling, as a more subtle process of dehumanization within the family, serves to objectify the labeled individual by substituting externally imposed identification preferences upon the susceptible target, thereby negating or denying her the freedom of her own self-creation. Even seemingly positive or benign labels (such as feminine, dainty, tomboy, sensitive, quiet, brainy) stamped in childhood can exert powerful influences on individual development and subsequent behaviors well into adult life. Hudak (2001) states, "labels become a part of our lived experiences; they can become a part of one's life, one's identity and hence, difficult to replace. . . . Stigma is not removed by word substitutions, but is rather worked through in one's lived experience" (pp. 9–10). On this note, I want to suggest that a person may become more aware, more conscious of how childhood labeling has impacted her development and still not fully realize the threat that internalized oppression poses to her understanding of herself as a subject who must consciously choose her freedom in order to reclaim her project of personhood. As such, the philosophical disposition that is the existential attitude is a necessary state of awareness from which to reclaim selfhood and pursue one's project with a renewed understanding and commitment to existential freedom.

The damaging impact of earlier labeling experiences may not have been intended when first applied by my parents, other family members, and the label-makers of

schooling, but they became fodder for my own negative interpretations of myself as an

impressionable young person seeking family approval and social acceptance. In essence,

the effects of childhood labeling were such that I adapted to what I thought those labels

meant. I internalized them and, by doing so, I participated in my own objectification,

becoming more thing-like in my automated responses to the stimuli that impacted my

existence on a daily basis.

As an adult, with greater consciousness of my freedom to be who I choose myself

to be from one moment to the next, I am more aware of choosing, possibly creating, the

features of identity that I wish to embrace, and only as they affirm my personhood. But

this is a process of unfinished duration, an existential process of working through past

dysfunctions, present situations, and future possibilities. I will always be working through

the negativity of past labeling experiences that promoted a superficial and inhumane

concept of myself as the "smart one," "the achiever," the good girl," "the people-

pleaser," "the emotional one," "the weak one," and "the selfless one," because, in

effect, it was through those labels that I became selfless. They substituted for the personal

exploration and meaningful creation of a self existentially authentic to my way of being in

the world. They did not confirm my personhood because they did not affirm my freedom

and my humanity. Instead, I assumed a self that was a thing for others.

Educational Constructs

Do we hear about internalized oppression in educational circles? Are teachers

routinely labeled as incompetent, inept, ineffective, insignificant, even non-essential

when students' test scores do not meet the mandated standards? For that matter, do

teachers routinely internalize now familiar schooling labels of dehumanization that actually de-personalize their roles as educators, labels such as "tester," "assessor," "evaluator," "classroom manager," "facilitator," etc.? Do today's teachers accept their situations of existential oppression without question, discussion, or critique? If so, can we say that they have internalized the culture of the neoliberal oppressor, along with the oppressor's message of objectification? Or, is it more accurate to say that being existentially oppressed means that the educator knowingly lives the experience of dehumanization as alienation from the oppressor and from the self, deploring her situation and, yet, feeling trapped within it? On this view, can we say that the chronic degradation of self that emerges from alienation, resignation, and professional isolation has become the norm for those educators who experience their days in the school building as both existential entrapment and disconnection from anything resembling the possibility of a humanizing dialogue among supposed educational partners, be they teaching peers or school administrators? If teachers cannot be part of a humanizing educational dialogue, how can they *be* (my emphasis) at all in the neoliberal world of schooling? I will discuss my interpretation of existential oppression as a somewhat separate phenomenon from internalized oppression in the next section.

For now, to acknowledge internalized oppression, the teacher's adaptation to the dehumanizing labels associated with neoliberal pedagogy, as a present and pervasive reality in the world of 21st schooling is to recognize the anti-human nature of an educational model in which competition, superficial standards, and technological systems and relationships rule the day. In turn, it is easy to see how this kind of educational

ideology and culture are but reflections of a larger socio-cultural dilemma in which the integrity of the human experience, in general, is not sufficiently valued in modern Western society. Thus, to fully realize that oppression is not a phenomenon exclusive to Third World nations or to peasants in the Brazilian countryside is to confront the existential realities of both human fallibility and possibility across the increasingly anti-human, data-driven, technologically sourced terrain of the 21st century. With extremely detrimental consequences running under the radar of our external consciousnesses as workers, caregivers, teachers, parents, and citizens, how can we distinguish between the necessary "programming" of relatively benign socio-cultural practices that underscore the creation of civilized communities and cultures and those that speak to dehumanization and the denial of personhood? Understanding that internalized oppression can plant its roots in childhood, then fester and grow with the added influences of neoliberal schooling, how might it be possible for the labeled, externally identified child to recover herself—if not in the present moment—then as an older child, or even as an adult? As for the latter scenario, how might it be possible for the educated adult, the educator herself, to rupture the false images of internalized oppression so that she might eventually see herself anew, possibly for the first time, as her own self-creation in a chosen state of existential freedom, either within or outside the walls of neoliberal education?

In answer to such questions, I *choose* (my emphasis) to believe that reclamation of personhood, even before it can be translated into resistance to oppression, exists as a possibility; not as any kind of guarantee of ultimate triumph over the forces of oppression and dehumanization, but certainly as an inward existential possibility that, for many of

us, becomes an existential necessity. In fact, I have learned through my own experience

of educator existential oppression that it is absolutely necessary that I choose freedom,

personally and pedagogically, in order to be able to live with myself with any sense of

integrity; in other words, so that my personal, philosophical, and professional values are

in alignment; so that my identity, as both a private individual and a public citizen is

intact. To be more explicit, I am talking about striving for existential authenticity.

Whether or not I can ever stake a claim to my own actualization of personal authenticity

is highly questionable. However, what is most important is the awareness that I can

choose and act with the goal of authenticity clearly and consciously in mind. In his book,

Existentialism in Education, Van Cleve Morris (1966) asks, "And who is the authentic"

(p. 48)? His insightful response sets the stage for more directly considering the effects of

dehumanization and objectification, experienced as internalized oppression or possibly as

a more nuanced rendering of existential oppression, on the health and integrity of

individual personhood.

> And who is the authentic? The individual whose example is perhaps beyond the reach of most of us: the individual who is free and who knows it, who knows that every deed and word is a choice and hence an act of value creation, and, finally and perhaps decisively, who knows that he is the author of his own life and must be held personally responsible for the values on behalf of which he has chosen to live it, and that these values can never be justified by referring to something or somebody outside himself. (Morris, 1966, p. 48)

Existential Oppression

From the outset of this study, I have specifically referred to educator existential

oppression as the central topic/problem at hand. I have explained educator existential

oppression as the negation of the educator's personhood in the neoliberal educational setting, meaning the denial or negation of her subjective stance as an independently thinking individual and, with that, her freedom to choose how and what she will teach. On this view, the educator's freedom to pursue her project, personally and pedagogically, is compromised, if not outrightly denied, and as such, she is confronted with an oppressive situation. For many educators, the sense of dehumanization and objectification is palpable as they find themselves operating like mindless automatons on an assembly line of standardization, uniformity, conformity, and acquiescence to an external authority. For other educators, the situation may not feel so dire, possibly because they have been schooled this way themselves and do not presume to critically question the status quo. There yet could be others who support the neoliberal agenda because they actually believe in the testing/measurement model. Clearly, having experienced existential oppression myself, I am committed to the cause of educator liberation as an inward self-reclamation and as an expression of resistance in the world.

Yet, how are we to understand this claim of existential oppression in a modern, democratic society such as ours, a society in which the individual has the option/right to choose her career, her life project? She is not forced to do this work, and she is not overtly oppressed in terms of her physical and material freedom. On all these points, I submit that it is necessary to consider existential oppression as a particularly philosophical phenomenon that is quite particular to the individual, corresponding to her present reality in relation to her perception of herself as a value creating and meaning making subject in the world. Once consciously aware that she cannot express herself fully

and authentically within the school setting, the teacher is then certainly aware of the limitations and constraints on her freedom. She knows inside herself that she is at odds with the ideological/pedagogical stance of the neoliberal regime, but she typically perseveres in her work, ultimately ending up at odds with herself, as well. This is how existential oppression begins to take over the soul and psyche of the teacher who knows who she *should* be (according to her more natural, humanistic instincts and values) as an educator, but who has become fragmented and torn between her philosophical and pedagogical values and the demands of the neoliberal agenda.

The denial of freedom from which educator existential oppression emerges is not an overtly visible or physical manifestation of power exerted by one party over another, such that it would be evidenced by physical constraints on one's freedom or denial of shelter and necessary sustenance. Rather, and somewhat like internalized oppression, existential oppression is a condition experienced within the self, and it is the self that must consciously and actively choose freedom if it is to be released from this kind of bondage. In an article concerned with the role of social workers and their modes of practice in relation to clients' situations of oppression, "Confronting Oppression not Enhancing Functioning: The Role of Social Workers within Postmodern Practice, Dybicz (2010) specifically addresses existential oppression in a way that resonates with my rationale that educator existential oppression is a particularly individual experience and condition of existence. He does so by grounding his argument in the work of Martin Heidegger, specifically as it relates to the latter's concept of Da-sein.

> Heidegger (1962/1927) employs the term "Da-sein" to capture the non-categorical particularity of this being [the individual]. It is through understanding Da-sein, the unique being of the person, that we are able to truly understand the individual. This is in contrast to understanding things in our world, for example, a cow. We can point to any cow, and through employing categorical understanding, come to know all cows. According to Heidegger (1962/1927), to treat persons in this way is to treat persons as things. (Dybicz, 2010, pp. 30–31)

Dybicz (2010) explains Heidegger's Da-sein as individual being embracing the freedom that makes subjective identity-creation possible in a socially constructed world. On this account, oppression looms as a threat when the "master narratives" (Dybicz, 2010, p. 37) of an authoritative social order limits or takes away the individual's freedom. In the case of the educator, the standardizing discourse and authority of the neoliberal narrative limits and, in many cases, disempowers the educator's access to both academic and personal freedom in the workplace, frequently and negatively impacting her claim to freedom as a private individual. In this way, the progression of the educator's existential project is stunted, and she begins to live the experience of existential oppression, alienated from the system and progressively disconnected from the expression of her "true" self and her intrinsic values in her work environment, possibly even beyond over time.

> Da-sein refers to one's uniqueness as an individual—one's identity within the context of one's constructed world. So oppression occurs when discursive elements of the dominant discourse—narratives, or master narratives as labeled by some (Brubaker & Wright, 2006; Sands & Krumer-Nevo, 2006)—begin to restrict the possibilities of Da-sein. In plainer language, master narratives begin to define the individual in such a way that one's essence, or worth, is lessened. (Dybicz, 2010, p. 37)

At this juncture, I want to invoke a clear correlation between Heidegger's Da-sein and Sartre's (1984) "being-for-itself" (p. 117), the latter to be explained in more detail, along with other existential terms, in Chapter IV and in Appendix B, "Tenets of Existentialism." Using different philosophical terminology, both terms speak to the individual's uniquely subjective existence in the world, a state of existence for which the individual is responsible because she is essentially and existentially free. It is this very property of the individual's particularity as a subject that renders existential oppression both real and so very individual in affect because it is not based on a socially constructed category (think of the prior cow example) or on a common disposition that encompasses all individuals in exactly the same way. As Dybicz (2010) states, existential oppression "does not rest upon a categorical understanding of the individual, but rather upon a particular understanding of the individual as a unique entity: Da-sein" (p. 37) or, in Sartre's lexicon, as a being-for-itself. Therefore, it is important to understand that whether we are talking about the arena of social work or the institution of education, it is the individual, within in her uniquely experienced situation of existential oppression, about whom we are speaking. This does not mean that others are not living through similar experiences of oppression, but the subjectively embodied individual can only truly be conscious to her own particular circumstances and, in turn, in control of her response to them.

Both Heidegger and Sartre point to the possibilities that are inherent to one's consciousness of existential freedom. The caveat is that these possibilities must be chosen by the individual, within her particular situation of oppression in order to counteract it or

move beyond it. Thus, in terms of Dybicz's rendering of an oppressive master narrative in the world of social work, the possibility of freedom as Da-sein cannot be realized under "the current horizon of understanding " (Dybicz, 2010, p. 37), meaning the status quo. However, as Da-sein, or as a being-for-itself, the individual can access her freedom, "in terms of one's free will, [having] the ability to construct counter narratives to the oppressive master narratives, and thus move Da-sein beyond one's current horizon of understanding by constructing a new social reality or world" (p. 37). Sartre (1984) expresses the same idea in *Being and Nothingness*, noting that the individual who finally decides that her situation is intolerable will then choose to take action to resist or change it. Still, phrases like "new social reality or world" implicate a broad-scale disruption of the status quo that is not a likely accomplishment for the individual educator in view of the present realities of neoliberal culture. Nonetheless, according to existentialism's emphasis on possibility and personal transcendence, the individual educator can create a new existential reality for herself by choosing her freedom, inwardly, and potentially by constructing a new social reality within her present classroom or in an alternative educational setting.

A final matter to consider: Is there a significant difference between internalized oppression and existential oppression, having earlier alluded to distinctions between the two? Based on my own experience of existential oppression, I believe that there is a qualitative difference between these states of oppression. Internalized oppression connotes the oppressed individual's inclination to believe and adhere to the oppressor's externally imposed story about herself. As an existentially oppressed educator, I

experienced a very conscious conflict between my own pedagogical values and ideals in contrast to the neoliberal oppressor's story about the officially sanctioned role and values of the contemporary educator. I never believed, never owned the neoliberal version. Nonetheless, the damaging effects of existential oppression—understood as both an act of dehumanization perpetrated upon my being by the neoliberal institution of education and as my own alienated state of existence within that institution—resulted in my functioning as a fragmented person, knowing my pedagogical values, but simultaneously trapped within them and cut off from any meaningful and sustained expression of them in my daily practice. In essence, I did not take on the oppressor identity, but I was increasingly disconnected from my "true" or authentic way of being myself as an educator. Deep within my being, I maintained my self-constructed values, but I was existentially and pedagogically isolated in my workplace and, consequently, out of sync with any clear sense of existential wholeness in terms of living and expressing my personal and professional integrity in the world.

Now, with conceptions of oppression having been explored in some depth, I end this chapter with an abbreviated of discussion of personhood based on Sartrean existential theory. As such, "An Existentialist Conception of Personhood" is not an exhaustive treatment of Sartre's notions of personhood and existentialist ontology. Rather, it is intended to provide additional context to this chapter's prior emphasis on oppression, thus rounding the circle of what I consider an exploration of the oppression-personhood dynamic. Lastly, this last section of Chapter III also serves as a transition into Chapter IV, "Turning to Existentialism" where, going forward, I focus my attention on presenting

existentialism as a humanizing philosophical theory of personhood and existence, particularly in pedagogical contexts that address my current use of existential theory as the pedagogical foundation of my teaching practice in the undergraduate classroom; as such, my choice of response to the dehumanization of neoliberal education.

An Existentialist Conception of Personhood

As a philosophical school of thought, existentialism is concerned with individual personhood as constituted by the lived world of subjective, human experiences. In Sartre's (2007) words, "'existentialism' is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity" (p. 18) that manifest once the individual has been "cast into the world" (Sartre, 2007, p. 29) of mortal existence. Accordingly, Sartre's (2007) famous maxim, "existence precedes essence" (p. 20), asserts that the individual first *exists* (my emphasis) and then creates herself as a particular person, continually informed and impacted by the experiences and relationships that emerge during the course of her life. In this way, the individual shapes and comes to know herself as a particular individual, physically embodied and consciously separate from the other things and subjects of the world. In Sartrean (1984) terms, she is a being "for-itself and projected toward its own possibles" (p. 147) within the world of earthly existence. In turn, the subjective nature of individual existence orients our understanding of human consciousness as something quite unique and apart from other living creatures in that human consciousness can think about its own thinking. This capacity renders the individual capable of considering herself, in situation,

as an embodied self-consciousness, as a being who can choose to be self-aware and self-activating.

Moreover, existentialism adds a nuanced rendering of self-consciousness that gives a deeper complexity to commonly held assumptions about the average individual's experience of self-awareness; in particular, as it relates to the development of personhood. Following Sartre's premise that human existence in the world is the precursor to any notion of selfhood, we might say that the human individual becomes aware of the physical reality of her being in the world, first, and then embarks on her task of self-creation.as she develops increasing consciousness of self as a choosing/acting person. Thus, personhood is neither a predetermined condition nor a one-time static creation. Solomon (2005) explains the self-consciousness that underscores an existential notion of personhood as an attitude that engages the world by virtue of the individual's perceived place or situation within it, demonstrating both awareness and responsibility for how she will choose to act in a given situation. Existential self-consciousness is indelibly linked to the notion of choosing one's path, one's way of creating an embodied self with which to navigate this uncertain and challenging world. Looking at self-creation as an outgrowth of consciousness in action, Solomon (2005) states, "The self is an ideal, a chosen course of action and values, something one creates in the world" (p. xvii).

Sartre's (2007) claim that "subjectivity must be our point of departure" (p. 20) represents the individual's "project" (p. 23) of personhood, underscored by the applied consciousness of her freedom to choose, act, and involve herself—always as a particular and unique individual—in the world of others; continually shaping identity and

becoming more herself throughout her project of living. Thus, to be a person, a subject, is

to be an agentic being, as opposed to existing as an object or thing incapable of deciding,

choosing, and acting. To illustrate this point, Sartre (2007) explains, "Man [Woman] is

indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a

spreading fungus, or a cauliflower" (p. 23).

What about the existence of other subjects, individuals, in the world with whom

we necessarily interact and form relationships? Sartre (1984) tells us that, upon

encountering the "look" (p. 352) of the other, the individual subject becomes a kind of

object for the other's attention, just as she—the individual in question—encounters or

engages other subjects as objects of her attention.

> If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his
> relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure
> upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have a *nature*. My original fall is
> the existence of the Other. Shame—like pride—is the apprehension of myself as a
> nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such. Strictly
> speaking, it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a
> *thing*, but my nature is—over there, outside my lived freedom—as a given
> attribute of this being which I am for the Other. (Sartre, 1984, p. 352)

Regardless of the subject/other dynamic that fuels and sometimes undermines,

even corrupts, human relationships, existentialism's primacy of individual freedom and

subjectivity is the bedrock of its conception of personhood. In particular, and alluding to

Beauvoir's view of freedom as the moral ground of human existence, existential freedom

symbolizes personhood as the antithesis of victimhood associated with objectification and

dehumanization. From this vantage point, freedom is understood as the condition of

existence that nourishes positive qualities of human development; positive qualities

meaning those qualities that affirm humanity in its fullest possible expression as opposed to habits of self-denial and socially unjust practices that dehumanize and demean the human condition. Furthermore, while history reminds us of the existential truth that human freedom has been and likely will continue to be threatened by those seeking power over others (through irrational, evil-minded motivations and goals), the existential *need* (my emphasis) to live in freedom will continue to motivate and function as the rational individual's impetus for choosing self-consciousness and personhood over self-negation and victimhood, thereby also valuing human cooperation as opposed to human conflict.

To expand on the affirming aspects of existential personhood, and incorporating the subject/other dynamic, existentialism's primacy of individual subjectivity holds that the individual's will to choose and act for freedom is not unilaterally self-serving. In choosing freedom for herself, the individual is responsible for the consequences of her choosing as it affects her life and, potentially, the lives of others with whom she interacts. Simultaneously, others hold the same responsibility for their choices and actions. As such, there is an implicit, existential reciprocity at work for those individuals who value freedom as a moral value and as the fundamental condition for living in a shared world. Sartre's (2007) own words, expressed in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, reinforce this point (presuming a rational state of mind as the default condition of Sartre's individual) while also deflecting stereotypical accusations of existential solipsism, the idea that the individual can only be certain of the existence of her own mind and no other

> Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all. (Sartre, 2007, p. 24)

Closing Commentary

To synthesize the themes that underscore this chapter's discussion of philosophical theories of oppression, internalized oppression, existential oppression, and an existentialist conception of personhood, I wish to emphasize the distinction between the dehumanizing nature and function of oppression versus the humanizing nature and function of existentialism as a philosophy of humanistic possibilities, specifically in the contexts of this study of educator existential oppression. To be clear, existential possibility does not imply simplicity or ease of living. Quite the opposite, no matter the depth of the individual educator's dedication or perseverance for the cause of personal and pedagogical freedom, none of us is guaranteed success or smooth sailing along our respective journeys. I suggest, then, that having nothing more concrete to hold onto, it is essential that each of us reclaim and preserve the integrity of personhood in the neoliberal world of education by forging relationships with our students and with one another in that world and elsewhere, acknowledging our ability to choose from a mutual commitment to the humanization of education via an existential approach to teaching and learning.

I now proceed to Chapter IV, "Turning to Existentialism" where I use excerpts from post-class, teaching field notes to serve as my existential data in support of a pedagogy of personhood and, therefore, as my strategy of resistance to neoliberal educational ideology in an undergraduate classroom composed primarily of teacher education students. I correlate these field notes with philosophical analyses of the

following, fundamental existential tenets—individual freedom, subjectivity, choice,

action, and responsibility—referencing Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Beauvoir, Freire,

and Fanon. In this way, I propose that we turn to existentialism as a humanizing response

to neoliberal education and educator existential oppression.

CHAPTER IV

TURNING TO EXISTENTIALISM

Overview

In this chapter, I turn to existentialism as a humanizing philosophy for living and educating. With this intent in mind, I present existentialism as a philosophical attitude (the existential attitude) of resistance and possibility, positioned as the antithesis of neoliberal education's dehumanizing agenda of standardization and objectification that underscores the problem of educator existential oppression. Linking to Chapter III's prior discussion of oppression and personhood via Beauvoir, Fanon, and Freire, I offer this chapter as existentialism's critical response to neoliberal oppression by illuminating existential tenets that support a vision and practice of pedagogy as an existential enterprise that centers on individual freedom, affirmation of personhood and recognition of the subjective nature of the human individual. In other words, according to the existentialist vision of a humanizing pedagogy, the individual—embodied as teacher or student—is central. As such, the individual teacher "must himself [herself] be a free personality actively engaging in such relations and projects with individual students as to leave no doubt in their minds that they, too, are *in fact* free personalities and are being treated that way" (Kneller, 1958, p. 115).

The structure of the chapter incorporates philosophical analyses and explanations of existential tenets particularly associated with Sartre—individual freedom, subjectivity,

choice, action, and responsibility—that are organized around selected excerpts from post-class, reflective field notes collected during the 2013 spring semester when I taught a foundations of education course to undergraduate students, most of whom were enrolled in the teacher education program at my university. With these field notes purposed as my "existential data," I aim to illustrate, in real-world time and contexts, the contemporary applications of these existential concepts as I work to incorporate them in my teaching praxis and as they contribute to my personal and pedagogical development; furthermore, how this kind of humanistic pedagogy might contribute to the personal and intellectual development of my students. Turning to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Beauvoir, Freire, Fanon, and especially Sartre, I interpret aspects of their theories as they inform not only each of the specified tenets, but also as these theories support my existential attitude of resistance and possibility against educator existential oppression and the anti-human agenda of neoliberal education.

Existentialism: A Philosophy of Humanization

Historically, there has been a curious irony at play regarding two opposing perspectives on existentialism as a philosophical school of thought: (a) existentialism is a humanizing philosophy for living based on the individual's consciousness of self as a particular subject, free to create her identity and to pursue her life project in the world, the possibilities of which include intentional choosing and acting against the contingencies and uncertainties of human existence and (b) existentialism is a philosophy of spiritual darkness, angst, alienation, and nihilism (the view that human existence has no meaning, value, or purpose) in response to life's obstacles, challenges, and

uncertainties, a frequent theme in existentialist novels and plays. Looking to Sartre alone

(other writers of dark existentialist literature are plentiful, but are not singularly relevant

to this study), such works as *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1944) are stereotypically noted

as representing the meaninglessness of human existence, along with the negative, often

destructive ways in which people manifest their anxieties toward self and others in the

world.

Between these two views, I choose to understand existentialism as a philosophy

of humanization, a philosophy that validates the human experience *despite* (my emphasis)

the darker realities of life. How is this so? Existentialism interprets individual existence

as the initially unchosen (in terms of being born into the world), but unavoidably

necessary space of freedom in which personal subjectivity, choice, action, and

responsibility are the existential tools with which the individual can shape her identity

and pursue her subjectively conceived project for living, thereby assigning a sense of

purpose, meaning, and value to her life. In other words, the individual can simply resign

herself to existence as a meaningless proposition by doing nothing, or she can choose to

create meaning of her life by taking action to give it purpose and value. Thus,

existentialism can be interpreted as a philosophical attitude of human possibility and

purpose, but only if and when the individual chooses to act on her freedom. From the

existentialist perspective, such choosing emanates from the individual's awakening to her

existential attitude.

The individual finds herself in that acute state of self-consciousness known as the

"existential attitude," identified early in Chapter I and continuing as a running theme

throughout this study, when she awakens to the seminal realization that she is simultaneously free and utterly responsible for her situation, now and into the unknown, contingent future. In fact, Solomon (2005) asserts, "the existential attitude is apparently not chosen. One finds oneself in it" (p. xiv). As an attitude reflecting a more profound experience of individual self-consciousness, the existential attitude becomes the foundation of the individual's way of looking at the world and her place in it. However, according to Solomon (2005), "self-consciousness itself is not universal, although once one becomes self-conscious, he cannot go back, no matter how he denies himself, drugs himself, *leaps* or *falls* away from himself (the terms, from Kierkegaard and Heidegger respectively, carry their evaluations with them)" (p. xiv). Based on my own experience, I would also add that the individual finds herself *in* (my emphasis) the existential attitude when her quality of life and well-being are experienced as hanging in the balance; when her self-consciousness, in situation, renders choosing between existential impotence and existential agency necessary to her ability to function at all. In other words, the existential attitude becomes absolutely necessary to the individual's survival as an intact, functioning self. Clearly, this is not simply a physical survival of which I am speaking, although it could be in specific cases. I am talking about the survival of one's sense of viability, as a human being—a person—navigating her life journey. Clearly, the existential attitude does not constitute a head-in-the-sands approach to dealing with life's thornier issues. It does not mean an inwardness that shies away from the world. To reiterate, it is just the opposite. Instead of yielding to the darkness and impotence of resignation and futility, the existential attitude is "an attitude of self-consciousness"

(Solomon, 2005, p. xiii) in confrontation with the world; on the one hand, illuminating the individual's sense of aloneness and angst against life's contingencies while, on the other hand, compelling her to respond to her situation in order to make meaning of it, to improve it, change it, or possibly move beyond it. In essence, the existential attitude becomes the ground from which the individual can, then, choose to act in the interest of her own liberation.

Finally, to more fully appreciate existentialism as a philosophy of humanization, it is essential that we understand the individual's situation, while unique to her, as a reflection of what is commonly called the human condition or the human experience. In other words, as human beings, we are collectively confronted with the unavoidable tyrannies and anxieties of earthly existence. Therefore, as beings uniquely capable of exercising our imaginations and our capacities to empathize, we have the ability to relate to the joys and pains experienced by others due to the given commonalities of the human experience; yet, as uniquely and historically situated individuals, still not feel the experience specifically as one's own. Therefore, if we are genuinely self-conscious and other-conscious, we can imagine the situations of others because we have our own experiences of life from which to draw. As individuals, we are alone, but as human beings, we share a collective experience of existence. On this view, I suggest that it is the consciousness of the existential attitude that compels the individual to think about what each of us can do to make our humanness more accessible, to ourselves and to the world, in order to imbue earthly existence with greater purpose and meaning. Where better to apply such a humanizing attitude than in the world of neoliberal education?

Note: See Appendix B, "Tenets of Existentialism" and Appendix C, "Historical

Overview of Existentialism" for more specific and substantive information about the

background and concepts associated with existentialism as a philosophical school of

thought.

The Contemporary Undergraduate Classroom:
Tensions between an Existential Pedagogy of Personhood and Student Resistance

> First, freeing oneself from existential oppression is a necessary precondition for
> spawning a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000/1970), and hence, achieving
> empowerment. This critical consciousness is what enables one to act effectively
> towards seeking change in the issues and problems one confronts. (Dybicz, 2010,
> p. 38)

During the spring 2013 semester I taught a foundations of education course, ELC

381 The Institution of Education, a course predicated on social justice issues as they

impact teaching and learning, and critically examining the intersections between public

education and the social, cultural, political, and economic structures that frame our

society. Set up as a seminar-style classroom environment, the dynamics and activities that

define the course involve assigned readings, follow-up seminar discussions,

responsive/reflective writing activities, and students' choices of creative projects. It goes

without saying that having experienced and personally suffered through the standardized

pedagogical practices of K-12 schooling, I genuinely embrace the relative freedom of my

undergraduate classroom.

As an instructor of undergraduate students preparing to be future teachers, I

continue to position myself as a resistor to the prevailing neoliberal model of

standardization and objectification by exposing my students to critical and philosophical

forms of pedagogy that can be adapted to their own evolving teaching philosophies and future pedagogical practices. Of course, my pedagogy is embedded within the existentialist perspective that I bring to the classroom. Interestingly, a paradox has emerged with regard to the contrast between my existential view of education and the neoliberal view with which these students, as a whole, have been educated or trained. From my interactions and discussions with many of my former (and current) students, I have learned that existential freedom, as manifested and practiced in the classroom, can be a disconcerting, anxiety-producing experience for the unsuspecting student who has been conditioned to the standardizing climate of K-12 education. Based on direct discussions with the students, a large number of them reveal that they are more at home with a concrete notion of education because that is what they experienced throughout their years of K-12 schooling. In other words, the normative educational process for these students has typically and consistently encompassed a dependence on rubrics, assessments, tests, right/wrong answers, and concrete grading systems. As such, the security and precision of academic concreteness is frequently preferred over the open-ended, abstract possibilities of academic freedom because the notion of possibility, in itself, speaks to uncertainty and requires an alternative, imaginative way of thinking. So, the ironic situation in which I find myself as university instructor is this: I am free (not absolutely, but relatively free) to pursue my personally conceived pedagogy of personhood in the higher education setting. Yet, a new tension sets in as I now experience my own freedom being resisted by others, my students, positioning me in confrontation with existential oppression once again. However, this time it is not my own oppression

about which I am speaking. Rather, I am speaking of my perception and interpretation of existential oppression as I understand it to be embodied in many of my students. (Note that when I speak of existential oppression pertaining to my students, my language will reflect a tone of generalization; certainly, there are students who do not fall into this category). I make this claim because students say that they *know* (my emphasis) they have been educationally indoctrinated according to neoliberal ideology, and they are quick to criticize many of their prior educational experiences throughout their years of K-12 schooling. Nevertheless, while they know they have been/are existentially oppressed, many yet choose to continue down the neoliberal path because it is familiar, promises job security, and because the abstract nature of freedom looms as a kind of uncertain, sometimes frightening, stranger in their externally manipulated frames of reference.

Finally, my pedagogical challenge of humanization has been and continues to be aimed at my students. In terms of the semester under study, a number of students demonstrated their willingness to embrace the opportunities of intellectual and existential freedom provided in this classroom space, while many others did not. The tension that marks such a pedagogical situation clearly represents an ongoing challenge to the existential teacher. At the same time, it represents an often uncomfortable challenge to the individual student because opening oneself to a space of freedom requires the student's willingness to engage herself and the world in more profound ways; to risk engaging multiple points of view that might cause her to question the familiarity and security of her own, long-held assumptions about education, society, and life itself. Consequently, opening students' minds to their own possibilities of existential freedom,

as unique individuals and as future teachers, has proven to be a formidable challenge, one that actually reinforces my pedagogy of resistance *against* oppressive neoliberal reforms and *for* the existential and academic freedom of both teachers and students.

Field Notes as Pedagogical Portraits of Existential Tenets

Each of the following sections is headed by a fundamental tenet or principle of existential theory that I emphasize as essential to a pedagogy of personhood that affirms the humanity of both teachers and students. Immediately following each heading is one or more excerpts from my class field notes, serving as existential data and a textual "portrait" of the pedagogical dynamics of a particular classroom experience and my reflective response to the situation at hand. In both obvious and subtle ways, each of the excerpts is intended to convey pedagogical and existential substance to the tenet to which it is linked. The idea is for the reader to see more deeply into the thoughts and concerns of one educator attempting to pursue a pedagogy of personhood in a particular undergraduate classroom, as well as to better understand the existential tenets upon which she chooses to base her pedagogy. As such, I intend this pedagogy of freedom and humanization as an ongoing statement of personhood affirmed for my students and myself, representing a definitive rejection of existential oppression.

Individual Freedom

Excerpt from class field notes—class 3, January 23, 2013, **on experiencing my own freedom.** *So, getting divorced, living on my own again, my girls away at college, quitting the public school system, embracing the PhD program, the death of my father, the death of my beloved dog, Max, and confrontations with acute anxiety have brought*

me to this place in which I am more in touch with myself, as I understand myself to be in terms of my own conscious creation.. This creation includes the innocent truth of my childhood independence, my curiosity, my outspokenness, and love of learning. That never went away, really, but rather became submerged under the cover of avoidance of pain from the dysfunctional events of my adolescence—when I stopped being myself. I submerged that formerly free child under a blanket of responsibility for the wrongs perpetrated by the adults in my life. Now, no longer submerged, I discover how much I like teaching. I like students responding to me, as well as seeking me out. I feel like a real individual who matters for something in this world. Yes, it's human connection, but it is also reconnection with the me that I consider authentic—that girl who shone in school just by being there, the girl who made the classroom her psychic home, the girl and woman who feels the greatest excitement walking around college campuses, absorbing the feeling of humming minds within glorious buildings that hold stores of life stories and human information. I like ideas. I like to discover ideas and explore them with others who come alive with ideas. So, how do I make my students come alive with ideas? I am trying to build a community so that they will open up and talk. I cajole and I perform. I put my gregarious side forward, tell them personal anecdotes, and try to bring warmth to the setting. I forget that I am actually being me, and not performing falsely. Perhaps this is the underlying message of today: I am not performing—I am being me. I am a born student/educator—I love this kind of human interaction. I feel a sense of excitement swell my insides when I make a connection with the students; when they respond as if I have something valuable to share with them. I trust that we will build this community, and that

they will open up. They are just so trained, like seals on stools, waiting for the next command and a fish treat to reinforce their expected responses. I don't want trained seals that I have to feed a certain way to get a response. I want them to feel, to relate to the topics we address in 381. I want them to emerge from their own blankets of smothering and their own swimming pools of submersion and find that part of them that says, "I can resist, I can speak up, and I can be an individual in the classroom, in society, in the world." That's what's wrong with education today. Kids are so trained. They admit it. They don't know how else to be. They just want to know the "right" answers and move along to the next event. This is crazy and inhuman. I want my classroom to be the one in which they wake up to themselves. Not simply awakening from sleep, but to experience an awakening from submersion of selfhood so that they might each become conscious to the possibilities of individual freedom.

Excerpt from class 5 field notes—Wednesday, January 30, 2013, on the tension between individual freedom and students as objects of neoliberal indoctrination. *I enter the doorway of my classroom. Our "seminar square" has been set up. I announce my friendly hello and chatter about the last batch of student papers recently graded and what we're going to do in class today. Utilizing the flat surface of a table upon which to organize my papers and notes—essentially my classroom existence for the next hour and 15 minutes—I continue to speak, seeking connection with my students. Why do I always feel that I have to fill the empty spaces with my voice? Seeking their approval? Trying to be engaging? Trying to initiate dialogue? All of the above. I look at my notes, like a mini script, to prompt myself on what needs to be said: comments*

about another batch of papers written on an assigned reading, "The Banality of Evil." I

offer, "Your papers are quite good—actually full of conviction, so why don't you speak

your thoughts aloud in class?" No response.

I recall a philosophy of listening course in which doctoral students explored

philosophical interpretations and dimensions of human listening. To whom or what am I

listening in this situation? Students' voices? More often, listening to their silences.

Listening to my own voice, both the internal chatter and the external conversation. I

purposefully invite my students to engage in meaningful classroom dialogue, to share

opinions, and to be open to diverse points of view. I think to myself that an education

course such as this—predicated on critical pedagogy, contemporary social justice issues,

and philosophy of education—should naturally provoke passionate ideas and engaged

discourse. With a touch of desperation and a large dose of humor, I announce to the

group, "Liberate yourselves!" In other words, embrace your freedom to be who you are,

who you are striving to become. They smile, laugh, and reinforce my hope of inspiring

deeper efforts at personal reflection, open communication, and a realized sense of inner

freedom, as well as connection to this educational community.

Still, I ask myself if this is too much, too controversial a practice of socio-cultural

critique and self-examination? Might I crush the teaching aspirations of these future

educators? I openly voice this fear to my class, further explaining that while we intend to

critique many aspects of the institution of education, hopes and possibilities for change

are available. Hope and possibility can be their tools of choice as they consider why and

how they will teach, as individuals who have chosen the teaching profession. I ask my

students if I make them uncomfortable with my forthrightness. They answer no. One young woman even pronounces to the class that she is amazed that that I (as instructor) model the principles of which I speak. Grateful for the affirmation, I reiterate that the purpose of this class is to communicate freely and respectfully, to think critically and philosophically, to explore personal possibilities that speak to individual freedom and the ongoing becoming of evolving identity creation, and, certainly, personhood affirmed for both teacher and student.

Sartre's (2007) conception of existential freedom emerges from his famous maxim, "existence precedes essence" (p. 22). He is saying that the individual is cast into the world through the incident of birth, having no choice in the matter and having no pre-determined nature or identity to anchor her there. This view of existence speaks to an absolute kind of freedom that, on the one hand, looms as frighteningly overwhelming; or, on the other hand, looms as the open possibility of freedom with which the subjectively self-conscious individual can choose to create herself and her life path. On this understanding, Sartre (1984) claims that the individual "is condemned to be free" (p. 567) because each of us engages the world, initially, without a predetermined plan of what to do with our lives in this very space of freedom. In the following passage, Sartre more fully explains what is involved in coming to terms with oneself as a freedom. Note that he uses the masculine noun/pronoun to signify the individual, the literary convention of his era. While I am quoting according to his specific use of language, I intend that Sartre be understood as speaking of the individual with no gender identification intended.

> We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. . . . Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre, 2007, p. 22)

From the existentialist perspective, identity creation has everything to do with the individual's consciousness of self as a unique and free existent in the world; yet, one who is always situated in history and in experiences with others, all set against the uncertainties and contingencies presented in by existence itself. In existential terms, this means that the individual cannot escape the "facticity" (Sartre, 1984, p. 127) of existence, the "givens" of mortal existence in an uncontrollable universe. Cox (2009) explains the tension between individual freedom and facticity as "The resistance or adversity presented by the world that free action strives to overcome" (Cox, 2009, p. 77). Therefore, it is essential to emphasize an understanding of facticity as an unavoidable feature of human existence with which individual freedom is constantly entangled.

In the contexts of this study, the neoliberal institution of education represents the facticity against which the freedom of the individual educator is pitted. Theoretically speaking, and according to Sartre, the existentially oppressed educator must choose how she will confront the facticity of her situation in order to avoid the self-deception and rationalization of "bad faith" (Sartre, 2007, p. 25) that would have her submerge her will to freedom by complying and conforming to the givens of a dehumanizing educational model. "The technical and philosophical concept of freedom . . . means only the

autonomy of choice. . . . choice, being identical with acting, supposes a commencement

of realization in order that the choice may be distinguished from the dream and the wish"

(Sartre, 1984, p. 622). Therefore, on Sartre's view, individual freedom moves from a

seemingly unobtainable abstraction, a kind of nothingness, to become a present reality for

the educator who consciously and intentionally chooses herself as a creator and maker of

identity and, with that, her pedagogical project.

> Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and
> which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*. As we have seen, for
> human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the
> outside or from within which it can *receive or accept*. Without any help
> whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself
> be—down to the slightest detail. Thus freedom is not *a* being; it is *the being* of
> man. (Sartre, 1984, pp. 568–569)

What about the students in my undergraduate classroom, most of whom are

preparing to become teachers in K-12 public education? Do they approach their lives

with a Sartrean conception of individual freedom that places responsibility on oneself for

the creation of identity and for the pursuit one's fundamental project in the reality of

lived experience? I suggest that it is the exceptional individual, be she student or teacher,

who has escaped contemporary K-12 schooling unscathed by its system of

dehumanization. Consequently, as products of neoliberal K-12 schooling themselves and,

now, as students preparing to work in that same arena, there is an ironic dynamic at play

in which individual freedom expressed by the educator (me) is frequently met with the

facticity of the student's resistance to engage this pedagogical experience of freedom.

Once again, I see myself faced with existential oppression, this time embodied within my

students whose educational indoctrination to the neoliberal standardization and

objectification model appears to be well in place. In effect, evidenced by their ways of

engaging (or not), expressing themselves (or not), completing their work (or not), and

taking advantage of the freedom afforded in this classroom (or not), the majority of these

students have internalized their prior training and habits of conformity to the neoliberal

agenda, only to continue down this same path in their teacher training.

From the classic existentialist perspective, notions of conformity abound,

evidenced by Kierkegaard's "crowd" (in Solomon, 2005, p. 32) mentality and what

Nietzsche (2001) refers to as the "herd instinct" (p. 114). First, Kierkegaard correlates

truth with the integrity of the individual as an independent and free thinker who does not

taint the personal purity of her values and beliefs with the less contemplative, externally

imposed influences of the dominant social order or group. For Kierkegaard, truth is

apprehended within the inwardness of the individual who affirms her own personhood;

therefore, as one who refuses to submit to the power and influence of the group at large

for the sake of belonging to something larger than oneself, or attaching to a false sense of

security that comes from passive anonymity.

> There is another view of life which conceives that wherever there is a crowd there
> is untruth, so   that (to consider for a moment the extreme case), even if every
> individual, each for himself in private, were to be in possession of the truth, yet in
> case they were all to get together in a crowd—a crowd to which any sort of
> decisive significance is attributed, a voting, noisy, audible crowd—untruth would
> at once be evident. (Kierkegaard, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 32)

For the existentially oppressed educator, the implication to be drawn from Kierkegaard's

existential view of individual freedom and personal truth is to be willing to go inward in

order to define her pedagogical truth and align it with her personal values. In this way, and with the consciousness of reflective intent, the educator can begin to reclaim the integrity of personhood and the truth of her existential project.

As previously noted, Nietzsche's conception of the herd instinct links closely with Kierkegaard's view of the crowd. He brings a nuanced understanding to the herd instinct by correlating it with his notion of socially constructed moral codes that induce the typical individual to follow the prevailing master narrative of her time and place willingly and uncritically. The best explanation of Nietzsche's herd instinct is the one provided by Nietzsche himself. As such, I quote the following passage, from Book 3 of *The Gay Science*, in its entirety; no paraphrasing would do Nietzsche's words justice in this instance.

> Herd instinct.—Wherever we encounter a morality, we find an evaluation and ranking of human drives and actions. These evaluations and rankings are always the expression of the   needs of a community and herd: that which benefits *it* the most—and second most, and third most—is also the highest standard of value for all individuals. With morality the individual is instructed to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function. Since the conditions for preserving one community have been very different from those of another community, there have been very different moralities; and in view of essential changes in herds and communities, states and societies that are yet to come, one can prophesy that there will yet be very divergent moralities. Morality is the herd-instinct in the individual. (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 114–115)

Similar to Kierkegaard, if we are to correlate the herd instinct to the situation of existential oppression in either teachers or students, according to Nietzsche, we are talking about the submergence of individual freedom to a conception of human experience that is predicated on the safety and anonymity of belonging to an externally

created and imposed view of individual existence. On this view, with the ideology

(morality) of neoliberalism successfully disseminated across the nation's public school

systems, and with job security a prime concern among most education workers regardless

of their positions, the existentially oppressed educator is hard-pressed to take her own

stand in the name of her own existential freedom. In fact, we might say that if the

oppressed educator internalizes the oppressor's ideological or moral stance, she has thus

adapted or acceded to a situation of internalized oppression in which consciousness to her

own subjective interpretations and understandings is effectively submerged. Thus, she

joins the crowd or masses of teachers who toil daily at tasks dictated by the system to

which she has contracted her time and efforts. Yet, to be an individual as Sartre,

Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche would have us understand the individual, even within the

context of a situation of existential oppression, means that the individual teacher

ultimately knows that she must decide between her freedom and the neoliberal crowd. If

she decides in favor or her freedom, it is because, in becoming conscious to herself, she

finds it necessary to change her way of being because she can no longer tolerate herself

as an existentially oppressed being. Again this self-awareness, this self-consciousness is

the space from which the existential attitude of resistance to oppression emerges and

translates into the educator's commitment to freedom as the only possibility for living

and working in the realm of education today.

Understanding Nietzsche's link between a culture's ideological notions of

morality and the individual's propensity to attach to those notions, we can look to the

distinction he makes between what he calls the master morality and the slave morality.

These two terms represent a dichotomy of personal qualities and values as applied to the individual, inferring higher versus lower status—morally and socially—particularly as such values are set by specific cultural, societal, and religious standards. The "goodness" of one type of morality over the other lies in the cultural contexts of the society in which the individual exists. In *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche (in Solomon, 2005) describes master morality as emerging from conditions in which ". . . the ruling group determines what is 'good,' [and] the exalted proud states of the soul are experienced as conferring distinction and determining the rank of order" (p. 76). In the case of master morality, good connotes the higher ground of nobility and honor in thought and action— particularly toward self. In contrast, Nietzsche associates slave morality with a character that adapts to suffering, such character desiring or believing that suffering can only be eased by others through ". . . pity, the complaisant and obliging hand, the warm heart, patience, industry, humility, and friendliness . . . these are the most useful qualities and almost the only means for enduring the pressure of existence. Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility" (Nietzsche, in Solomon, 2005, p. 78). Nietzsche's interpretations of master and slave morality tend to overturn conventional conceptions of what comprises the "good" qualities ascribed to human existence versus those conceptions of slave morality that are considered "bad," undesirable, and pitiful. Nietzsche's master morality positions the independent and free individual as noble and honorable, self-determining and "value-creating" (Nietzsche, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 76), symbolizing a self-full (self-empowered) attitude of living in the world. The

negative or weak character of slave morality is to be understood as a self-less attitude of existence that, according to Nietzsche, borders on stupidity.

> . . . the good human being has to be *undangerous* in the slave's way of thinking: he is good natured, easy to deceive, a little stupid perhaps, *un bonhomme*. Wherever slave morality becomes preponderant, language tends to bring the words 'good' and 'stupid' closer together. (Nietzsche, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 78)

In essence, Nietzsche's master morality connotes the existentially free individual who chooses her fundamental project and her way of being in the world, not tied to externally imposed notions of what it means to be a good or bad person. On the other hand, Nietzsche's slave morality connotes the follower, the sufferer, the one who attaches to the herd because this is what the dominant culture dictates that one must do in order to remain a member, in good standing, and to enjoy the security that it promises. Certainly, based on his condemnation of the herd instinct and his views on master/slave morality, Nietzsche (2001) would condemn the existentially oppressed educator for being a follower, for choosing the superficial security of acceptance and expedience associated with conformism over choosing the uncertain possibilities of one's own freedom.

Finally, Nietzsche's conception of the individual's "will to power" (Solomon, 2005, p. 65), the driving force behind all human needs and functions, lends itself to a notion of individual freedom that affirms personhood and negates the dehumanization of existential oppression. On this view, the individual educator's will to empower herself by refusing to accept or accede to neoliberal objectification makes it possible for her to choose herself (as Sartre insists), representing an existential value of "good" and the

initial step toward affirming the existential reality of individual freedom and personhood. "What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is *growing*, that resistance is overcome" (Nietzsche, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 99).

Taken at face value, Nietzschean concepts like master/slave morality and the will to power resonate with negative overtones because they invoke images of "power over" someone or some group. However, I suggest that this is not the existentialist perspective. Instead, I posit that the meaning behind the notion of a master versus slave morality resides within the individual's own creation of identity as a manifestation of her choice to live in freedom or not. By assuming and acting upon the character traits with which she identifies herself, the individual reflects either the self-empowered stance of the master morality (personal freedom) or the passive stance of slave morality (victimhood). The issue of power, in this sense then, is a subjectively existential issue that has more to do with the individual's ability to affirm herself, her choices, and actions as manifestations of freedom; not as an issue of power in the form of oppression of others. As such, the educator who would assert the power of her personhood in the arena of neoliberal education is not seeking or willing her personal power over students, other teachers, or administrators. Rather, she is willing the power of her personhood as her statement of existential freedom against dehumanization in the workplace.

Subjectivity

Excerpt from class 2 field notes—January 16, 2013, on teacher subjectivity reaching out to students' subjectivities. *I start the class with a 5-minute Gallagher video in which he spoofs schooling and the inconsistencies of the English language. I then show a clip from the animated movie "Waking Life," the clip in which Dr. Robert Solomon talks about the actual exuberance fostered by existentialism to a young college student. I want this clip to somehow better define the key existential concepts to my students than just giving them rote definitions. I ask for feedback on the clips, and it is still silent. No one wants to speak up. So, of course, I fill in the space with my own chatter, trying to prompt responses from the students. This is a challenging job for the teacher—to get people to invest themselves and speak up for who they are, what they view, what they perceive, and how they feel about it. I sense my own prejudice, my personal belief that kids today don't embrace the intellect; that they are so trained to get a job, any job, and in this case, to be teachers. What does that actually mean to them? Still, blank faces, although there were a few laughs during the Gallagher video. One student, a male, said he liked the sense of freedom to be who you are from the Waking Life clip, but no one really picked up on that, at least not verbally to extend the conversation. Blank faces, scared faces, unaware/unconscious underneath these blank stares; challenged faces who are not used to being provided a place of freedom to reveal themselves to me—to each other—to themselves. Polite, quiet, mannequin-like faces.*

I sit down at the table and use my written prompts to get dialogue started. I feel the weight on my shoulders/on my spirit to make the room come alive, to wake up these

students' minds with the light of an idea or an emotion that will open the floodgates of conversation. A few comments here, a few there, like slow, unpredictable drips of water from a leaky faucet. I am still talking a lot, but I am determined to motivate a dialogue. I ask more pointed questions—aiming arrows of thought at these students targets—arrows dipped in controversial topics like social class, racism, sexism, stereotypes, bullying, religion, and ethnicity, and so forth. I want to pierce them with these arrows to stun them into consciousness, to awaken thought and curiosity, to stimulate their imaginations, their anger, their memories, their pain, their hopes, and their dreams. I want to leave my mark with them so that this class will count for something in their lives. Why do I want to have this effect? It makes me feel. It makes me feel worthwhile—that I have some meaning to share. I want the intellectual interchange. I want them to open up to themselves, more than I want them to open up to me. I want to connect and be connected in a way that lets me know that my arrows not just pierced, but actually made meaning central to the targets, to the hearts of the students. This is not altruism. This is showing me that I am good at this teaching; that I'm good at connecting with people; that I can use the learning environment as my work and my passion. It's as much about me as it is about them. And I'm not going to apologize for this statement.

When we talk about the reading on "School Wounds," I point my targeted questions, my arrows, toward distinct prompts of school-based shame, prejudice, bullying experiences, dualities of smart vs. dumb, etc. to inspire or maybe prick at a personal memory or experience. An African-American student talks about being assumed as dumb in predominantly white schools. Another student talks about a teacher who killed her love

for learning by insisting that all assignments be completed as illustrations, a mode of expression with which she felt uncomfortable. Another student commented that a teacher had told her she was stupid. Similar stories came to light. But not everyone spoke, not just yet, not this second class of the semester. Regardless, I began to feel redemption in that that we broke the silence that I would have interpreted as disinterest, non-engagement, boredom, intimidation. And that kind of silence, for me, would have meant a defeat, a sense of failure. This kind of silence is not the calm of reflective silence, but rather the silence of powerlessness, of disconnection, of futility. I am eager and persistent, if nothing else. And my thoughts fly across the cranial landscape—few do I catch, but then there are some that I grasp as new inventions with which to explore new possibilities in my 381 classroom.

Excerpt from class 8—February 11, 2013, on the unconscious student. *I think about today's 381 class, and I find writing about it difficult. Because it is repetitive, because my efforts at establishing an existential classroom of actively involved individuals are not bearing the kind of fruit I would like. It is not personal for me—I'm giving them all my educational energy and passion when I am there in that classroom. It's personal for them, in my view.*

It's like there is a deficiency at hand; like a vitamin or mineral deficiency, but this deficiency is one of passion. I use it here because I used it with them, the students. So, now I'll try to explore a description of deficiency. For example, when I envision a person deficient of nutrients, I see someone pale of complexion, with skin that might be mottled, broken out, or flaky. Hair is thin and dull. Eyes are glassy and vacant. The mind is

confused and nonsensical. Speech is not deliberate and focused. The mood may be depressed or anxious. I picture lack of muscle tone and a generally weak physical body.

I have just described how I see most of my students when I look at their bodily representations and what I imagine their minds to be like. Instead of pale complexions, I see those flat, one-dimensional faces. There is no texture to them—not even the redness of blotches and pimples, or the ridges of flakes on peeling, dry skin. Their hair is not even a noticeable feature of their being because their being is so flat and dull—yes, dull like deficient hair. Their eyes are definitely glassy and vacant, belying emptiness behind the physical landscape of flatness—like the flat plains of the Midwest that seem to go nowhere—they have nothing to say; which renders the question of how they think? Are their minds confused and nonsensical. I would say confused, and I would say, yes, nonsensical in that thinking of this depth of critique and organic quality does not make sense to them, as they are programmed; and 381 is not a component of their inner software. They are programmed with non-nutrient data input, and 381 is food for the soul. Certainly, speech is not deliberate or focused—speech is quantified and qualified— there is no spontaneity—no passion. Are these students depressed or anxious? I cannot say what goes on in their personal lives and how they are affected in terms of classroom behaviors. But instead of depressed or anxious, as subjects in my classroom, they appear to me as incomprehensible, non-readable, non-feeling. So, it follows that there is a lack of muscle to the collective body of this class; and there is a weakness of individual spirit.

I repeated my new mantra for this semester, "Liberate yourselves!" Let yourself out to just be and say whatever comes to mind. I want them to experience freedom in this

classroom and to take a leap of faith by opening to this pedagogic environment that
would welcome some rebellion and challenge to their taken-for-granted worlds.

How does the student's lack of consciousness of her own freedom as a unique subject implicate a state of existential oppression that precludes possibilities for individual engagement and community-building in the existential classroom? What is my task as existential educator in this regard? I suggest that I must help the individual student realize herself, consciously and subjectively, so that she might *have* (my emphasis) herself to contribute to the pedagogical experience. To implement the task at hand, I must continue to respond to each student as a particular person—through our classroom dialogues and through the personalized commentary I provide to each student on each of her twice-weekly reflection papers. The latter is a time-consuming process with a class of twenty-four students, but one that I claim as wholly authentic and essential to facilitating a bond of communication between us as two subjects. By coming to realize herself, subjectively, as a unique participant in the educational relationships that emerge in the classroom, the student achieves presence not only to herself, but to the others who make up this *world* (my emphasis) that is our classroom community. "Without the world there is no selfness, no person; without selfness, without the person, there is no world" (Sartre, 1984, p. 157).

Can an existential pedagogy of personhood, as enacted and encouraged by the individual teacher, break through the silences of existential oppression in a classroom full of students? Can an existential pedagogy of personhood ultimately stimulate students to awaken to their individual subjectivities so that they might break through these silences

(as opposed to other kinds of silences that emanate from subjective contemplation)? While Sartre did not theorize about education per se, Burstow (1983) provides an answer to these questions about oppression and student subjectivities by explaining Sartre's view of education as anti-conventional in its negation of the student as ". . . an empty vessel to be filled" (p. 179), a statement that resonates with Freire's description of the banking concept of education discussed in Chapter III. Based on Sartre's privileging of individual subjectivity as the starting point of identity creation for the individual, his philosophy renders a view of ". . . education which is more individualistic, more dialogical, more libertarian, more socially aware, more respectful of the needs and emergence of the individual" (Burstow, 1983, p. 179). Envisioning the teacher as helper, Burstow (1983) makes the case that Sartre positions the teacher as one who helps ". . . the human being come to terms with his individual project, accept his freedom and facticity, and emerge as the unique human being that he is" (p. 180). On Burstow's interpretation of a Sartrean educational philosophy, Sartre would be concerned with providing a pedagogical space of freedom in which student subjectivity is meant to grow and prosper.

Kierkegaard's philosophical emphasis on individual subjectivity, along with his passionate commitment to personal truth, resonates in the following statement, "the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea I can live and die for*" (Kierkegaard, as cited in Solomon, 2005, pp. 7). For Kierkegaard, truth is derived from the individual's subjective understanding of her needs, beliefs, and passions for living, and this personal truth must be lived with unflinching commitment against the objective

propositions that often stand for truth in the external world. In *Truth is Subjectivity*, from

Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard (1846) writes:

> When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will simultaneously indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *the objective uncertainty, seized in the most passionately inward appropriation, is truth*, the highest truth there is for an *existing* person. (Kierkegaard, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 21)

What does it mean to be genuinely in touch with one's own subjectivity so that

the individual cannot help but be passionately committed to her self-created or self-

discovered truth and the project that emerges from it? How does one decide what she is to

do in this world? How many teachers today can affirm that they have chosen to be

educators because such a choice represents their individually held subjective truths and,

thus, their passionate commitments to pedagogies of personhood? And if they still hold

onto a shred of this passion while also living in a state of existential oppression, how can

these teachers get in touch with themselves as whole persons choosing to live their

subjective truths? On the other side of the equation, how many of my students see their

projects of education as their subjectively true callings at this time in their lives?

Clearly, from the existentialist perspective, if personhood and academic freedom

are essential to her personal project, it is incumbent upon today's educator to break from

the crowd mentality, to go inward and recover her subjective truth—whatever that may

turn out to be—then choose and act accordingly and authentically. From the existentialist

point of view, the obvious question would be: What other way is there to genuinely live

and educate others if not as an expression of personhood and freedom in these neoliberal

times? On this view, my undergraduate seminar classroom is where I most directly aim my efforts at expressing educator personhood while encouraging students to reclaim their own as unique subjects. It has, and continues to be, a struggle to engage students in the exercise of their own self-liberation, having been so successfully and mechanically programmed to deny or ignore their own inner truths. Nonetheless, I pursue this pedagogy of personhood with a sense of Kierkegaard's passionate commitment.

Choice

Excerpt from class 15 field notes—March 6, 2013, on developing as a consciously independent thinker and chooser. *What actually stands out to me is a comment made by a student last week when we were discussing issues of race and social class. I believe we were discussing how human beings are the most profoundly intellectually capable of all living creatures, but on the other hand, the most helpless of living creatures when first born. So, we talked about how babies and young children learn about their very being in the world through relationships with others; how, even the activity of nursing cannot be understood by the infant as involving another person; the infant only can understand—through sensation—that something physically and emotionally nurturing is happening to her or his body/being. Then, of course, kids learn through contact with others as separate selves and through actual lived experiences. Then we talked about kids learning from the cultural standards of family, school, etc. A point may have been made about independently motivated think, but this particular student was making the point that young people don't know what to think on their own:* **"They need someone to tell them what to think."** *(as in family, schooling, and culture).*

This one simple comment speaks volumes about the way students are programmed in their thinking; how they bring this programmed mode of thinking to the university. Then we have to work to undo this mindset in order to wake up their minds so that they might develop the habit of thinking and choosing for themselves.

Independent thinking and choosing is a red flag of danger for those who prize sameness, stability, and unflinching order. For me, independent thinking and choosing conjure visions of complexity, sometimes emotional pain, but they also conjure visions of wonder and possibility as features of existential choosing for the self-conscious individual? How do we develop a culture and society of free-thinkers and choosers, not anarchists, but naturally free thinker and choosers. Most would feel at a loss, I think, relative to how to handle themselves in the world and with others. They would feel lost and unsteady—nothing to anchor them because they are not sufficiently anchored to their inner worlds. They don't know who they are because they are not conscious to themselves and certainly not conscious to their freedom to choose themselves, to shape their identities. No personal agency needed in this technicized and mediated world, the paradigms and bars are set. So, rather than thinking, choosing, and responding from inner resources of contemplation, reflections and decision-making, the individual becomes a reflexive being who responds according to conditioned behaviors intended to keep everyone safe and fashionably numb to felt, lived experience.

> I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice. . . . I am obliged to choose an attitude toward the situation, and in any case I bear the responsibility of a choice that, in committing myself, also commits humanity as a whole. (Sartre, 2007, p. 44)

I am very conscious of myself as a person who chooses to educate, as a "being for itself" (Sartre, 1984, p. 117); that is, as a self-aware individual intent on pursuing her life/work project in a space of freedom. In philosophical terms, being-for-itself is human consciousness that is aware of itself; first, as a unique subject in the world and, by extension, as a self-consciousness that becomes aware of other objects and human subjects in this same world. My students are the primary others in my pedagogical world, and because of them, I become a "being-for-others" (Sartre, 1984, p. 299).

As such, my awareness, intentions, choices, and actions are extended toward my students, these other subjects, whose lives intersect with mine in the pedagogical space of the classroom. Yet, existentially speaking, I must be a being-for-itself, owning the integrity of my own personhood in order to be a being-for-them. In other words, self-consciousness is necessary to other-consciousness. On this view, it is natural to ask, "How can the typical K-12 educator be a consciousness for her students if she cannot exist as a consciousness for herself in her present situation of existential oppression?"

From Beauvoir's perspective, the educator who does not resist oppression cannot be genuinely conscious to herself (the existential attitude) as an agentic subject because, in not choosing freedom, she is, in fact, in denial of her own humanity. "The man [woman] who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 24). In other words, the contemporary educator must want her freedom, as her moral grounding and as her conscious choice, more than external approval and the security of a job. For Beauvoir (1976), to choose freedom is the only means by which to choose a viable life of purpose and meaning.

Now, I can evade this choice. We have said that it would be contradictory deliberately to will oneself not free. But one can choose not to will himself free. In laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience, one contests the meaning of the project at the very moment that one defines it. The spontaneity of the subject is then merely a vain living palpitation, its movement toward the object is a flight, and itself is an absence. To convert the absence into presence, to convert my flight into will, I must assume my project positively. (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 25–26)

Beauvoir seems to offer no excuses in terms of the individual's commitment to her project as an ethical act of freedom. At the same time, she concedes, "But we also ought to ask ourselves whether one can will oneself free in any matter, whatsoever it may be" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 26). She then responds by noting one cannot view her project as having a specific deadline, as if the project would lose its purpose and its moral significance. "It is in time that the goal is pursued and that freedom confirms itself . . . It is only when the moments of his [the individual] life begin to be organized into behaviour that he [the individual] can decide and choose" (Beauvoir, pp. 26–27). By consciously and conscientiously choosing and acting for the sake of one's project of freedom, "The value of the chosen end is confirmed and, reciprocally, the genuineness of the choice is manifested concretely through patience, courage, and fidelity" (Beauvoir, p. 27). On this view, the educator who chooses to act toward the goal of pedagogical freedom, within or beyond the confines of the neoliberal classroom, may be still materially oppressed but is no longer existentially oppressed once she has chosen to reclaim her personhood and project of freedom. As long as she is pursuing her pedagogy of personhood, despite the obstacles, she is not complicit with neoliberal ideology; rather, she is embodying her project through her actions. Granted, this is not easy to sustain in light of the pressures

exerted upon the contemporary educator, but I submit that this is exactly what Beauvoir would recommend the teacher do if she wishes to continue her project of education in freedom.

> Man [woman, educator] is free; but he finds his law in his freedom. First he must assume his freedom and not flee it; he assumes it by a constructive movement: one does not exist without doing something; and also by a negative movement which rejects oppression for oneself and others. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 156)

On numerous occasions, my students and I discuss what existential choosing means. I sense that this is a foreign concept to them because they have experienced little existential freedom for choosing and acting in the traditional realm of schooling. However, by offering them choices in my undergraduate classroom—choices about how they will engage in discussion, in reading and writing assignments, choice in discussion formats (large seminar group, small groups, and so on), choice about their creative styles for projects, and choices about overall participation—I aim to stimulate their capacities for choosing, offering possibilities for self-affirmation as the appropriate response to years of dehumanization under neoliberal policies and practices in K-12 schooling. Yet, I realize that I can only offer them this particular space of freedom in which to practice habits of self-affirmation and subjective choosing.

Action

Excerpt from class 21 field notes—April 3, 2013, on dialogical engagement, **problem-posing, and praxis as intellectual forms of action in the existential classroom.** *While the chapter reading has to do with using Art as a universal language with non-English speaking immigrant students, I found myself veering into efforts to*

engage and re-connect with my own undergraduate students today. I did not split them up into small groups. We stayed in our seminar square, and I was hoping that we have progressed enough that we would have a stimulating, full-group conversation.

It felt forced for a while, but I kept probing at them with questions in an attempt to ignite sparks of interest, of personal responses to topics thrown into the air for their consumption. Much as I like them, I still find them impenetrable at times, their faces so blank that I think they are bored, and then reflexively perceive my assumption of their boredom as a reflection of my teaching abilities. The usual students volunteer to speak up. I like D a lot, but it bothers me when I see him looking down at his lap under the tabletop. Then I think he is texting someone on his phone, and since I like him and think he's quite bright, I think that he should be intent on and wanting to engage with me and the others in this class experience. Why should he be distracted from the brilliance of the intellectual interchange?—said/written with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

So, I am back to the issue of student engagement—to the perplexing situation of offering a space of freedom to students in which they can actively self-express and participate in reciprocal exchanges about art, life, education, social justice, the world, etc. To me, this offer would be as tantalizing as a bowl of dark chocolate fudge, heated so as to melt in my mouth with the flavor and the promise of a serotonin boost. I would figuratively eat up the opportunity to engage in conversations about philosophy, the arts, human education and life—my engagement in such discourse is an unqualified given. But not so with a great many of the students thus far. Student A and Student D are the most

inclined to speak up and have insightful, less traditional/less conformist things to say.

The rest, once again, appear expressionless—vacant. I wonder what they are thinking

I used my prepared prompts to solicit discussion about the chapter. I consistently had to regroup my thoughts, my prompts, seeking ways to reach these students viscerally. I directly asked them if they found the chapter interesting or not. No clear response—not yes, not no. Maybe neutrality, or maybe apathy? Who knows? I can make assumptions. I can guess. But I don't really know. I ask how many of them experienced the arts in their schooling—just a few, not the majority. I asked how many have traveled outside the U.S. A few, but certainly not the majority. Most had been on some kind of vacation, staying at resorts and tourist spots. Some mentioned seeing the discrepancy between the appearances (implicating financial status) between tourists and local residents in typical family vacation spots. I asked how many of them have been to New York City? Just a handful. I tried to explain how NY is such a blend of diversity: ethnicity, culture and lifestyle, language, etc. I asked the students to imagine going to a foreign country in which they could not communicate nor share their cultural ways of life as a natural, accepted way of being in the new and strange environment. A few nods of heads indicating that this would be difficult, but the concept of a different kind of setting or situatedness does not appear to resonate—I witnessed no substantial change of sensibilities, of body movement, of facial expression, of visual recognition of an idea with meaning behind it, no connection—looking for the signs of activated intellects!

Toward the end of class, I desperately try to connect by asking each student to which of the arts, or other forms of creativity, do they relate? I went a step further and

asked if sports or physical activities might be considered in the category of artistic

engagement. The class generally agreed that sports/physical activities would fit in this

niche. So, I went around the seminar square, one by one, and asked each student, as a

particular individual, what is her or his favorite sport or physical activity—both as

participant and spectator. It did not matter to me what answers were given—what

matters is that each student was selected/pointed to/designated/asked to engage from a

space of personal thought regarding personal preference. Some responded with more

enthusiasm and energy than others. After listening to each student's response, I shared

that I have returned to Bikram Yoga, briefly explaining that it is a yoga sequence of 26

poses, performed in a 105 degrees room, for 90 minutes. With purposeful earnestness, I

intended to convey the message that my yoga practice represents an actively lived part of

my life, contributing to who I am as an individual. It is an action and a practice that I

consciously choose to pursue as it provides the substance and shaping of experience to

my being. How might commitment to intellectual activity provide substance and shape to

my students' ways of being in the world of education and beyond?

I ended the class by trying to bring the final part of the discussion back to today's

assigned reading about validating and teaching immigrant students through art. I pointed

out that these students had to be actively engaged in some way that would be meaningful

to them, that would validate them as individuals, that would recognize their unique

cultures and backgrounds, and that would reinforce their learning processes as

*intentionally lived experiences. I compared my attempts to engage **them** (my students)*

through a discussion of their personal interests in the arts, sports, or both, signaling each

student individually to indicate genuine interest in what she or he had to say; that what each student has to say matters because each of them matters. Clearly, the energy in the room can be so variable, like people, I realize. But there they are, and I want to reach these students intellectually, emotionally, pedagogically through the activity of meaningful dialogue.

So, this issue of active engagement in the classroom conversation is real, an ongoing challenge for me. Despite the fact that I receive positive feedback from my students on class surveys, I feel that the connections being made here are fleeting; that, with a few exceptions, these students will fall in line with the commands of the system's generals and administrators. With a few exceptions, it seems to me that they are not really interested in resistance to the oppression of standardized teaching/learning methodologies and standardized habits of being; rather, they have internalized their own existential oppression to lesser or greater degrees. They say they hate testing. They claim that they have not truly learned anything of great consequence through the methods used in neoliberal schooling, but they are not inspired to change. If they won't engage while they have the freedom to be students in a class that invites intellectual curiosity and energetic dialogues encompassing alternative perspectives to the status quo, how are they going to engage, critically and creatively, their future students in a system that provides their paychecks, their retirement, and their summer vacations?

I look at my students and wonder how they do not think more about life from a wondering, dreaming, possibility-driven perspective. Where is their hope? Where is the desire to know more, to act more? Where is the desire to be more? One student actually

wrote in a recent paper that humans do not create meaning nor their identities—I do not comprehend this point of view. She explains that she is a concrete thinker and likes structure. She is also the one who said today that she likes worksheets when I was explaining that worksheets constitute a passive kind of learning that seems to degenerate interest in learning as an actively lived experience. Someone else said that she likes worksheets, too. Maybe there is security in worksheets: that which is given, the known question waiting for its rightfully appointed answer. Maybe these particular students treasure the security of passivity and sameness over the possibilities of action and diversity. Do they know they are indoctrinated to an oppressive system of education? Does it matter to them? I do not know their deeper, inner thoughts. But for many who find comfort in the crowd, security, the known, and the easier exercises for the brain and the soul justify the absence of independent choosing and acting for freedom. To question assumptions and traditional patterns would definitely upset the apple cart, sending out signal flares of panic to an internalized system of compliance and conformity. So much easier this way . . .

Excerpt from class 24 field notes—April 15, 2013, on the passivity of virtual existence versus the active conversation of face-to-face existence. *I positioned the lesson focus on Sherry Turkle and Jaron Lanier—both esteemed academics, technology experts, cultural critics, and critics of technology overuse as we experience it today in the 21st century. This time, I had the students watch segments of selected videos: 1 longer video of Turkle doing a TED TALK and 3 brief videos of Lanier, talking about computers*

and people, creativity, and maintaining creativity in education. Fortunately, discussion ensued from the viewings as well as from my prodding with related questions.

In essence, the students "get" that our humanity is being marginalized (my viewpoint) through our hyper-connectivity as a way of life. Turkle talked about the preference for texting as opposed to talking; the ease and safety of virtually mediated relationships as opposed to the hard, messy, face-to-face interactions of embodied relationships; the seductive (and somewhat addictive) appeal of the Internet and social networking; multitasking versus singular focus; the fear of solitude for personal regeneration and inward focus (claiming that those who cannot be alone with themselves will be the ones who are lonely); and so on. Lanier talked about the falsity of pitting people against computers in an orchestrated attempt to determine who is smarter. In fact, he claims that people are willing to make themselves be/act more stupid in order to make computers look smarter. He used the example of teachers teaching to a standardized test in such a way that the outcomes make the computer the master.

Lanier also talked about finding that special teacher who made you feel magic; who made you realize what you wanted to do in order to "make your heart sing." I think this can also be stated as discovering and following your passion. All of this has to do with our human selves and the humanity we express in the world through the actions we take to be a part of that world, to craft lives of some meaning and purpose through our subjective choices and subsequent actions. These are the ideas that excite and resonate with me. And so I still cannot understand how educational policy, including the currently themed academic journals and conferences that seem to be embracing the pros of

technological, K-12 educational practices, are emphasizing journal themes surrounding

technology in higher ed and STEM curriculum. Are they all jumping on this same

bandwagon, just clamoring on to be up to date with the latest fashion or trend in a

consumption-driven, technological culture? Is this all some kind of wag the dog thing in

which everything is orchestrated without the average person realizing it, and so we go

along and play the game, even though it is we who are being played?

One of the biggest points (for me) made by Turkle, in the video from 2009, is her

view that the new frontier (of the coming decades of the 21st century) will be the

*reclamation of the human **"conversation."** I love this idea. It's not going backward—it's*

*going to **<u>a whole new place</u>**, but so far, it seems, only a few of us want to **<u>explore that</u>***

***<u>frontier</u>**, especially in education. It's very encouraging for me to hear this from a*

brilliant technology expert such as Turkle, also reiterated in his own way by Lanier. I see

this frontier of conversation covering all strata of human existence; and perhaps, it could

be this realization alone that makes conversation a new frontier. Not limited to the

parlors of elite intellectuals; or the smoky back rooms of rebellious social activists; or to

the muted, secret corners of the romantic idealists; the frontier of philosophical

conversation should be the HUMAN CONVERSATION that needs to take place at the

forefront of human education. So, in other words, technology should be used as a system

of support to the human conversation—to advocate and disseminate information about it

so that humans will know when/where to congregate in embodied spaces in order to

implement frontiers of conversation. Computers can facilitate, but not implement;

computers can carry the initial message, but not be the message; computers can be the

tools with which to compose messages from the brain to the fingertips to the keyboard, but they should not replace the human voices that need to enunciate those important messages and conversations between and among human beings.

The students claim to agree with the arguments presented by Turkle and Lanier, and they provide examples from their own experiences to back it all up. Student K says that sometimes when her mother picks her up in the car for a planned event, her mother will be busy talking or texting on the phone. Student S talked about running the other day with a couple of friends and purposefully leaving her cell phone at home. While it felt strange, she also realized that she felt free, although she did worry about missing a call or message. I reminded her that the messages would be on her phone, so that she would not, in actuality, miss anything. Student J said that she keeps her phone near her head when she goes to sleep, and that she tells herself the purpose is to make her more sleepy (??); yet, she ultimately admitted that she is keyed into wanting to be aware of anything of interest going on via Twitter, Facebook, etc. at all times of the day and night. We continued to communicate in this way. So, it is very puzzling to me that students can profess to see the pitfalls of virtual connection as a fundamental way of experiencing themselves and others in the world, yet continue to rely on this kind of passive existence. Perhaps it should not be so puzzling to me when I realize that outside of a class such as this, being plugged in is the norm of contemporary existence, inside and outside the walls of the university.

An existential pedagogy of personhood emphasizes Pinar's (2012) curriculum as conversation, previously addressed in Chapter II. To facilitate this pedagogical structure,

we create a seminar-style arrangement of desks and chairs whereby all students can see and interact with one another. This physical set-up is purposeful as an act of resistance to the culture of separated desks, a culture that perpetuates facelessness, a sense of non-identity pertaining to both self and others that contributes to a state of existential oppression. Disclosure is eroded when the view is of another student's back and when the traditional, authoritarian framework of the classroom positions the teacher at the front of regimented rows of bodies. Because conversation or dialogue is the seminal form of action in this space, student engagement and intentional participation in the seminar process is pivotal. On this view, the student must choose to engage by consciously discarding the programmed, neoliberal attitude of compliance and conformity. In essence, she must choose to release herself from her own perpetuation of existential oppression within this classroom space of freedom.

With freedom understood as the underlying catalyst of human existence, Sartre (2007) claims that it is action, along with the experiences and relationships that result from actions, that defines the reality of our lives. He lays out his conception of action in the following passage from *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

> Quietism is the attitude of people who say: "Others can do what I cannot do." The doctrine [existentialism] that I am presenting to you is precisely the opposite of quietism, since it declares that reality exists only in action. It ventures even further than that, since it adds: "Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life." (Sartre, 2007, pp. 36–37)

I suggest that Freire's strongest response to the situation of educator (and student) existential oppression lies in his notion of action as praxis: critical reflection leading to

action that yet continues to reflect upon itself as a humanizing strategy for intervening in the oppressive world of neoliberal education. "The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action" (Freire, 2000, p. 66). For praxis to be authentic and effectual, it must become part of the oppressed individual's way of thinking and being in the world, "the new *raison d'être* of the oppressed" (Freire, p. 66). For me, this resonates with the self-consciousness of the existential attitude acting upon the world, or intervening in it, in order to change it. In the case of the existentially oppressed educator, Freire would specifically recommend intervening in the neoliberal world through his problem-posing pedagogy. Doing this, the oppressed educator (by way of her existential attitude) makes a conscious decision to disrupt the neoliberal instructional prescription with a humanizing pedagogy that is both an effective pedagogy of resistance as well as a pedagogy for effecting positive change. As discussed in Chapter III, problem-posing, with its dialogical and inclusive emphasis on human communication, is the antithesis of the dehumanizing strategies associated with the banking method of education. Again, Freire would not accept excuses, complacency, and resignation to neoliberal power structures as reasons for not moving forward with a humanizing pedagogy. Once she has become acutely conscious to herself and to her situation of oppression, the educator is compelled to choose a liberating pedagogy in order to effect her own liberation. In the following passage, the reader can easily substitute "neoliberal pedagogy of standardization and objectification" for banking concept as they both represent anti-human models of teaching and learning.

> 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*—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of,* not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself . . . consciousness as consciousness *of* consciousness. (Freire, 2000, p. 79)

In general, for the existentialists, communications of all kinds represent forms of action—from dialogical activity, to writing, producing works of art, speech-making, demonstrating against social injustice, and the like. Clearly, then, they would advocate any and all actions that would promote existential freedom for both the educator and the student, encompassing a variety of locations such as the classroom, the school building, school board meetings, and beyond into the larger community. As an individual educator committed to a pedagogy of freedom for both myself and my students, I choose to facilitate those actions that I can implement in my classroom. Above all, while my students read assigned materials, write reflective response papers, and produce creative projects of their choosing, I am focally concerned with the dialogical component of our pedagogical experiences together. So, I remain concerned with many students' reluctance to speak up, to take the action of telling their stories, particularly because I have repeatedly heard students say, "I'm afraid I will say something stupid." "I'm a concrete thinker, and I just want to know the "right" answer." Clearly, these statements reflect the programming of obedience and conformity that pervades traditional schooling practices, the practices that foster the insidious state of existential oppression. So, I want to pursue

this pedagogy of personhood, for myself and for my students, especially in response to the counter-resistance of students who are not conscious to themselves and, therefore, not conscious to their own dehumanization as productions of neoliberal schooling policies and practices.

Responsibility

Excerpt from class 23 field notes—April 10, 2013, on being responsible for one's own thinking and doing. *I thought these articles, focused on the controversial topics of 21st century technology, reading skills, and education would light my students up with more obvious enthusiasm. Typically, I like talking about technology as a seminar topic because I tend to assume that undergrads will have something to say about such an integral part of their lives, especially when that part of their lives comes under criticism, sometimes under real attack. Last semester's class seemed to infuse a greater degree of emotion into the topic as opposed to the students I have this semester.*

What has become most apparent to me is how much technology is woven into the minute fractions of their time each day. Even the more assertive, dialogically active students reveal the taken for granted nature of having grown up with technology and technology access. One student mentioned that a friend told her about some guy who created an app that can provide a summary of any kind of literary or other academic work, providing quicker and easier access than traditional short-cuts such as Cliff notes. What this means is that the individual learner will be even less responsible for her own thinking—reminds me of another student's statement some time ago this semester: "Well,

somebody has to tell us what to think!" Of course, beyond the tech innovation of this app,

its inventor stands to make a bunch of money.

I divided the class into 4 smaller discussion groups with the following discussion

prompts:

1. *As a group, discuss the key theme or the topic you found the most interesting*

   from the 2 readings. Discuss, and reach a consensus, as a group, on which

   topic(s) to present to the whole class.

2. *As a group, come up with 20 things you would do if you were disconnected*

   from 21st century connected lifestyles. Life would be as it is for you today:

   you would be students, some working as well as going to school. But in every

   other way, concerning communication and information technology, you are

   disconnected for 1 week. What would that be like?

Groups talked for about 30 minutes. I browsed around each group, sitting nearby

and listening for interesting or compelling statements. I also clarified the theme of the

second reading because it is sarcastic in tone, meant to be satirical, and can be

misleading as a critique of the Carr piece. While Carr takes issue with the influence of

the Internet on our reading habits/skills, including the weakening of our ability to read

deeply and with focus, the second piece by Bowman agrees in a sarcastic fashion and

takes the argument to a deeper level. Essentially, Bowman is stating that the institution of

education embodies the culture at large. As such, and pertaining to neoliberal culture,

long gone is mainstream validation of the arts and humanities as critical to pedagogy,

human development, and to the perpetuation of democratic societies. In other words, if

ours is a culture of technology, then education becomes a culture of technology, as well, aligning its standards, methods, and policies with the power interests entrenched in commercialization, globalization, and the economization of society. Therefore, the institution of education must follow suit in order to mold the right kinds of workers for the neoliberal marketplace.

As to 20 things they would do during a week of disconnection, some responses were more meaningful than others, admittedly from my entirely subjective point of view. What was missing, for my sensibilities, was: (a) the exercise of students' imaginations and (b) a sense of personal responsibility for meeting this hypothetical challenge by choosing possibilities from a deeper connection to individual freedom.

Less meaningful:

suntanning, eating, sleeping, shopping

More meaningful:

hiking, puzzles and board games, reading books or magazines, coloring, other artistic activities, playing guitar or other musical instruments, writing a letter, being outdoors in nature

I made the following suggestion:

How about having some deep and amazing conversations with a group of friends, together and face-to-face?

Then, the following questions arose:

"How can we reach our friends if we can't text them?" [I suggested taking a walk/drive to their houses.]

"What if we don't know where they live?" [Try to find out for next time.]

Amidst all this, I noticed a couple of students on cell phones, amazing to me within the contexts of this conversation—and here they are, texting, right in the middle of it all. Finally, without looking directly at either of the students with phones in their laps, I said to the group that anyone using cell phones should stop because of all days and of all topics of conversations taking place at this time, texting is not only a poor choice, but it is an irresponsible choice. Frankly, I found this assertion of authority somewhat difficult because I do not want to be perceived as a figure of authority as such a perception complicates my dedication to a humanizing philosophy of education. At the same time, I am responsible for this pedagogical experience as instructor. For what are these students responsible, then, in the context of their own pedagogical experiences?

> We are left alone and without excuse. This is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre, 2007, p. 29)

Sartre's conception of responsibility can be understood as the partner, often the burden, of existential freedom, with responsibility assuming a kind of ethical value in that consequences, sometime positive and other times negative, always emerge from the individual's exercise of her freedom to choose and act. The ethical dimension lies in the individual's consciousness of herself as a freedom and the acceptance of responsibility for how she uses her freedom. While Sartre emphasizes the notion of individual

responsibility as it relates consequences applied to oneself, he also acknowledges the idea

of responsibility as it extends toward the situations of others in the world. Responsibility,

therefore, often leads to a sense of "anguish" (Sartre, 2007, p. 25) because of the many

ways in which acting in freedom and being accountable/responsible for one's actions

affect not only one's own life, but the lives of others.

> First, what do we mean by anguish? Existentialists like to say that man is in
> anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes
> that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator
> choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but
> be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. (Sartre, 2007, p. 25)

Likewise, and even in terms of his nationalistic concerns surrounding the situation

of oppressed people dehumanized by colonization, Fanon's existentialist orientation

resonates with Sartre's conceptions of freedom and responsibility. Moreover, his

advocacy for violence against the oppressor resonates as a choice for which the oppressed

person is responsible in terms of outcomes that impact his own life, as well as the lives of

others.

> Fanon's thought is clearly existentialist in that he shares, with other existentialist
> thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, a belief that the human condition is to be free—in
> the sense that existence precedes essence—and to be fully responsible for the
> exercise of that freedom. The nature of that freedom lies in the capacity to choose
> and to act . . . Denial of that freedom is considered to be self-deception—bad
> faith—and is, clearly, considered as an ethical failure by Fanon. . . . So, for Fanon
> freedom and responsibility are not just an ethical neutral description of the human
> condition. They are also a positive ethical position. It is an ethics which takes
> truth as fundamental, not received truth or any form of doxa, but rather truth as an
> honest examination of one's self and the world. (Pithouse, "Fanon's
> Existentalism" section, n.d.)

In terms of neoliberal dehumanization and its impact upon the condition of educator existential oppression, the educator's acceptance of responsibility—as advanced by Sartre and echoed by Fanon—as a human ethic attached to existential freedom is inescapable for the educator who awakens to her existential attitude of freedom. At this point, and going forward, whatever she chooses to do carries with it an implicit and even greater realization of her responsibility to herself, to her pedagogical praxis, and certainly, to her students as the human others with whom she importantly interacts. While there is no excuse, according to the existentialist, for denying one's freedom, the condition of existential oppression must first be relinquished in order to truly realize the power and responsibility of freedom. As an educator practicing a pedagogy of freedom and humanization, I recognize my freedom in the undergraduate classroom and the responsibilities that I hold there. At the same time, I also recognize the responsibilities of my students, as free (whether they, themselves, realize it or not) human beings, to choose how they will learn and how they will interact with me. Essentially, and ideally, if we consciously live our existential freedoms and responsibilities to ourselves and to one another in this classroom space, we are choosing and acting to resist neoliberal educational ideology, and we are reclaiming ourselves—teacher and students alike—from the self-negating state of existential oppression

A Few Words on Existential Authenticity

Excerpt from class 9 field notes—February 13, 2013, on students representing more authentic selves through the Reflective Writing project. *A breakthrough session today. I feel animated at the possibilities students have shown in*

their presentations of their first Reflection papers. This is the autobiographical assignment: "How My Schooling Experiences Have Contributed to the Shaping of My Identity." Animated in that the classroom dynamic actually felt alive today—with engagement and interest. The first volunteer was one of my "class leaders," seemingly confident and not afraid to speak in front of the group. The audience of peers, demonstrated clear attention. I did not notice peripheral activity of any kind going on. We are starting to break down the walls and build a community, I think. In fact, I said at the end of this class, that I think we have experienced something of a breakthrough today. One student suggested that I assign this paper earlier. I responded that it would be difficult to do that because the students would have no grounding into the readings or into the nature of this class to respond, with sufficient understanding and clarity, to the prompt. The idea is well-taken however.

     How do I feel personally as the instructor who, for the past class sessions, has written about my frustration with a wall of silence from these students? I feel animated, gratified, and even a little justified in my existential approach. It is not about me per se; rather, I think it is about the individual student being given an opportunity to really "exist" in a learning space, to really be, to feel safe showing self, and to take a chance and dive into the waters of the unknown; will it feel cold and forbidding? Or will it feel like a warm embrace of affirmation and validation? Based on their presentations, a sense of authentic self-reflection and personal evaluation was palpable to all in the room on this day. Some brief portraits:

Presenter—the confident young woman who revealed that her educational background encompassed the various arts. Did these humanistic learning experiences, integrated with the hard subjects, inform her personality/identity evolution? She thinks so, having developed inner confidence through exposure to many different ideas and experiences. So, she exhibits a kind of worldliness that comes through experiencing multiple points of view and lived experience.

Presenter—the sensitive artist —brought in a lot about some negative schooling experiences, involving being held back; shaming through denial and punishment, along with problematic family dynamics, including divorce.

Presenter—felt apart from the proverbial group throughout her schooling experiences because she was advanced and kind of isolated; because she was given different work to do that made her feel different, alienated from the rest of the class.

Presenter—from a small town family who wanted to control her choices; but she had to decide to go against being held back in order to go forward with her own evolving choices about who she wants to be and the kind of career she wants to pursue.

Presenter—the student who has consistently his submitted papers late; the one that I don't necessarily believe in terms of his storied excuses; but he volunteered to present. I was surprised because I was expecting that he had not submitted his paper by 2pm today—the deadline for submission. He talked a lot about being criticized by others, friends and family, for wanting to be an educator. In other words, why not go into business, medicine, or law where you can make much more money? He talks about this having been an ongoing theme in his life. Something that he's been wrestling with; in

other words, do what he believes he wants to do, or acquiesce to the outside pressures of

unsolicited advice from others? He seems to be on course with doing what he thinks is

right for him. I don't know what to make of this person—he has a gift for articulation. I

also sense anger in him, something I cannot really know or pursue. I think he will

continue to surprise me this semester—with erratic writing submissions and then possibly

some stellar work.

Presenter—talked also about the pressures of family desires/expectations versus

her own personally felt calling for being an educator. The existential choice of taking a

stand against the family expectations is apparent and seemingly necessary to move

forward, to move beyond.

What are my dynamics, as instructor, in this student presentation process? I

notice that each presenter directs primary attention to me. I do listen intently. I

remember, at times, thinking about my listening process—being conscious of it. I was

listening for connections between experience and identity shaping as well as for

connections between oppressive schooling experiences and existential confusion.

Listening for examples of personal choices made—evidenced by stories involving

choosing education versus going into business. Listening for rebellion, listening for

responsibility for one's point of view. Listening for patterns among the students' stories.

Listening for their authentic voices coming out of their usually shielded personas.

I am more cognizant of my bringing the existential, philosophical focus to the fore

in this class (as opposed to last semester). I think this awareness relates to my doing this

very research, working to align my choices and actions with what I say this research is

about. I want to infuse the learning environment with the existential attitude, a

philosophical attitude of self-awareness and becoming. I target my students in this way.

How can I more effectively target myself as the subject/researcher? Does the process feel

authentic to me?

Existential authenticity, from a Sartrean perspective, is a concept that embodies a

kind of moral interplay between individual freedom and responsibility. On this view,

authenticity is a far more profound concept than a singular notion of being true to oneself

by adhering to one's supposed beliefs and value system. Instead, existential authenticity

implicates the individual's understanding of her existence as undetermined and random in

its inception, yet totally free, rendering the individual fully responsible for how she

accepts and acts on her freedom. If she denies or ignores the moral ground of freedom

(Beauvoir, 1976) to which she has been born, such an individual is living in bad faith and

cannot claim to be authentic. Sartre (2007) states, "Those who conceal from themselves

this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by making determinist excuses, I will

call cowards" (p. 49).

On the other hand, Sartre states, "[those] who try to prove their existence is

necessary, when man's appearance on earth is merely contingent, I will call bastards" (p.

49). In fact, in the name of freedom, Sartre (2007) claims his right to "pass judgment" (p.

49) on those who would ignore it or abuse it. "But whether cowards or bastards, they can

be judged only on the grounds of strict authenticity" (p. 49)

Therefore, for Sartre, to deny existential freedom in the name of determinism or

to claim some special property or reason as the basis for one's particular existence in the

world is to live inauthentically. In contrast, the individual who strives toward authenticity is the one who chooses to advance her existence as a project of freedom, holding complete responsibility for doing so regardless of the contingencies that impact her choices and actions and the consequences that result from them. It is important to stress, then, that authenticity is not an absolute or measurable concept that can be standardized or objectified across any and all circumstances and conditions. Rather, it is a human conception that relies on human perceptions, understandings, and judgments which, in and of themselves, are subjectively based. In all this, then, the only certainty regarding human authenticity as an existentially moral undertaking is the individual's awareness of her existential freedom and her pursuit of that freedom with utter and complete responsibility.

I am free and responsible for the ways in which I choose to teach and interact with my students, but am I authentic? I cannot make this claim. But no longer existentially oppressed, I can surely continue to strive *toward* (my emphasis) authenticity in the pursuit of my project. I suggest that those educators who suffer existential oppression today cannot fathom the notion of authenticity as an existentially moral component of their current pedagogical projects. How would Sartre pass judgment on them? I imagine he would claim that those who do not choose themselves above the system of dehumanization to which they are tethered are denying their own freedom and are, thus, guilty of bad faith. The other existentialists noted in this study have expressed similar sentiments about the denial, negation, or rejection of freedom, and especially in the face of oppression. For these existentialists, there is no room for excuses, even in the

world of neoliberal education. Therefore, it is the educator who believes in a humanizing pedagogy of personhood who *will* (my emphasis) choose to resist existential oppression because it is the only authentic choice available to her.

Final Reflection

A brief compilation of field notes—**the ongoing pursuit of a pedagogy of freedom and personhood.** *If I stay grounded and avoid the self-deception of bad faith, I will trip and fall, but I will hold myself steady to the extent that I will not drown in conformity and existential self-alienation. If I have traveled this far, and have covered this much ground, then I must stay on this path of my teaching/learning journey. I must pursue this pedagogy of personhood as resistance to educator existential oppression and as the expression of personal integrity and pedagogical freedom.*

When I am teaching, I am being myself, but I am also performing. I am in the free action of my doing. I am dancing my dance of freedom, not tied to the puppeteer's strings, whether they originate within the dysfunction of family or in the dysfunction of a neoliberal, bureaucratic school system that would make me one of its herd followers. For some, the conception of being a follower is more nicely nuanced as being a team player, making the "following" sound desirable and politically correct, but I know better. Once the dance of freedom is experienced, no other music, no other dance steps will do. It's my music and my dance. I can perform as I feel it permeate my body, and as my psyche wishes to reveal itself to those with whom I am dancing. In the classroom, I dance with my students. More often than not, I lead. But I still try to offer them the lead, and sometimes someone will take it. I am right there though, ready to glide into the next step;

ready to assume the lead if needed, and yet ready to hand it back. It's a flow of back and forth, trusting and hoping, leading and following, but always wanting them, the students, to experience the freedom of leading for themselves.

In this chapter, I have presented a picture of existentialism as a philosophy of humanization, specifically as it pertains to the individual's pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood and rejection of the dehumanization of educator existential oppression. Moreover, I have illustrated, through illustrative field notes, serving as existential data, how existential oppression has also taken hold of many students, the result of their K-12 schooling experiences within the anti-human structures of neoliberal education. Nonetheless, I continue to focus on the possibilities and praxes of freedom with which I, along with other educators who have awakened to their existential attitudes, can intervene productively in the world of neoliberal education. The next chapter, Chapter V, concludes this study by posing and responding to questions that address the educator's potential leap from existential oppression to the existential attitude; the educator's pedagogical application of her existential attitude; the issue of personal and pedagogical authenticity; and the implications of a pedagogy of personhood for the individual, for community, and for the future of education.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Four Existential Questions

This final chapter is framed around four questions that point to possibilities of self-liberation for the educator who will choose to embrace and manifest her existential attitude in her pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood. I couch the discussion of these questions primarily in the theories of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Beauvoir, and Sartre as these individuals are indelibly associated with existentialism as a philosophy of human existence, while also referring to Fanon and Freire where applicable. Notably, I add the voice of Van Cleve Morris to this group, a scholar whose work on existentialism in education has provided valuable insights into existentialism as a philosophical foundation for teaching and learning since the mid-20th century. Overall, these four questions point to an overarching proposition: How can the existentially oppressed educator recover and embrace her freedom (personally and pedagogically) through an existentialist approach to her project of education; that is, through a pedagogy of personhood?

How does the individual educator make the leap from a state of existential oppression—a state of being in which she remains acquiescent to the neoliberal educational agenda—to the existential attitude of resistance and future possibility intended toward the reclamation of her personal and pedagogical project of freedom?

Throughout this study, I have posited a general assumption that the average, contemporary public school educator is mired in a situation of existential oppression whether or not she, herself, has consciously named it as such. Existentially attuned or not to her state of unfreedom—prescribed to and restrained as she is—I suggest that the 21st century, K-12 educator is yet aware that she has agreed to a socially constructed contract with the neoliberal regime, a contract that requires her uncritical and silent compliance with a teaching mandate that positions her as an object to be manipulated and controlled; that is, if she wishes to continue working within the system. I make this claim based on my own experiences in the drill and test era of public education, further supported by the experiences of numerous educators with whom I have worked over thirteen years in K-12 education as well as those I personally know still working in the field today, and certainly on the current literature that both documents and critiques the encroachment of neoliberal ideology into the institution of education (see Chapter II on this last point).

As discussed in Chapter IV, the standardizing culture of neoliberal education, in which the individual educator willingly or unwillingly subordinates herself to the crowd mentality, is not unlike the situation described by Kierkegaard across many of his writings where he decries the crowd's uncritical adherence to the socially constructed narrative of his time (19th century Denmark). "[A crowd] in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction" (Kierkegaard, as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 32). Nietzsche's (2001) discussion of the "Herd instinct" (p. 114) resonates with a similar disdain for those who follow blindly,

unconscious of their own subjective bearings. As Nietzsche (2001) puts it, the individual

sacrifices personhood to functionality as determined by the dominant culture of a society

that then dictates "the needs of a community and herd" (p. 114). Refer back to Chapter IV

for a more expanded discussion of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's views on the

submissive and conforming nature of the crowd as it bears relevance to the 21st century

educator's situation of existential oppression in the neoliberal world of education.

Also, in Chapter IV, I explained Nietzsche's theory of master versus slave

morality as it relates to the individual's conception of personhood. In other words, does

the individual educator understand herself as free and self-determining (master morality)

or as controlled and manipulated by an ideology (morality) of oppression (slave

morality)? We can correlate the contemporary educator's internalization of existential

oppression to Nietzsche's conception of slave morality, indicative of the individual's

adaptation to and acceptance of suffering through her experience of dehumanization and

objectification. On the other hand, we can make a connection between Nietzsche's

conception of a master morality and the existential attitude, both of which point to the

individual's stance as a self-affirmed and self-empowered individual, not dependent on

the opinions or dictates of others.

Using his own distinctive language and theoretical contexts in *Being and

Nothingness*, Sartre (1984), in philosophical alignment with the discussions of

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in Chapter IV, also alludes to the conforming nature of a mass

mentality that uncritically falls in line with the socially and politically constructed

narratives of a given time and place in history. On this point, Sartre (1984) addresses the

individual's acquiescent state of mind amidst the "historical situation" (p. 561) that is constituted by the dominant "political organization" (p. 561) or "determined economy" (p. 561) of one's milieu. Sartre (1984) contends that the individual "apprehends it [the compelling or oppressive situation at hand] in its plenitude of being and because he can not even imagine that he can exist in it otherwise" (p. 561). Therefore, not only does the oppressed educator lose herself in the anonymous sameness of neoliberal education's mentality of standardization, she is also susceptible to the internalization of existential oppression through her very abdication of her own imagined selfhood. With the dynamics of existential oppression at play in this way, the individual educator who is unable to imagine or envision possibilities of freedom is clearly not awake to an existential attitude that would *need* (my emphasis) to express its dissatisfaction with the neoliberal status quo in order to be, to exist, in the fullness and freedom of personhood. As such, Sartre (1984) asserts that in order for the individual to release herself from existential oppression, she must forego the "common opinion" (p. 561) of the crowd and, alluding to Kierkegaard, look inward in order to reflect upon and imagine an alternative path that is more authentic to her project of freedom. Sartre is saying that, at the culmination point of the journey from existential oppression to intentional self-consciousness, the individual decides that the given is intolerable and that alternatives for freedom must be chosen.

On all these points, I propose that the contemporary educator's existential attitude arises from a newly conceived consciousness (Sartre) of self as a freedom that turns inward (Kierkegaard) in self-affirmation, to ultimately be manifested through her will to power (Nietzsche), projected outwardly into the world as a function of her commitment

to her life/work project. On this view and specific to the educator's situation of existential oppression in this present age of neoliberal schooling, we can consider how the educator can come to terms with her existential attitude; in essence, by finding herself *in it* (my emphasis), as discussed in Chapter IV. To reiterate, Solomon (2005) reminds us that the existential attitude does not indicate an *a priori* consciousness of self or a pre-determined essence of being to be chosen. Rather, the self-consciousness that is the existential attitude demands that the individual create herself as "an ideal, a chosen course of action and values, something one creates in the world" (Solomon, 2005, p. xvii) according to her situation as she judges it and decides what she will/must do about it. On this view, the existentially oppressed educator, upon finding herself in the existential attitude of existential necessity and possibility, can choose to reclaim the subjective integrity of her personhood and restore to her pedagogical praxis an attitude of resistance and rehumanization. With this proactive attitude of self-awareness, the individual educator can emerge as the value creator of her own life, choosing how she will live and what she will do. As such, she is positioned to recognize and name possibilities and alternatives toward which she can choose to move forward in her project of personal and pedagogical freedom. "After all, when one becomes self-conscious, one is present as a person in any situation; the mechanisms of denial and detachment do not work" (Greene, 1973, p. 5).

Referencing Beauvoir as addressed in both Chapters III and IV, and transposing her theories to the current situation, I suggest that the educator's only possibility of release from existential oppression lies in her absolute recognition of her will to freedom—not simply as an existentially moral undertaking, but as the only undertaking

with which to emerge and stand as a viable human being. On the other hand, if the educator does not choose her freedom, Beauvoir would assess the situation as one of bad faith, symbolizing the educator's denial of her own subjective truth as a particular individual. From Beauvoir's perspective, then, coming to terms with the existential attitude is coming to terms with one's will to freedom, the existentially moral ground from which to break through internalized oppression, self-alienation, and resignation to living in a state of unfreedom. "My freedom must not seek to trap being but to disclose it" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 30).   Whether we call it the will to freedom, existential awareness, or the existential attitude, the individual educator must want the integrity of her selfhood and her project of freedom more than the paradoxical security of unfreedom and the lie of anti-human education to which neoliberalism attaches. She must see the possibility of freedom as more essential and more available to her existential project than resignation to the status quo. The "how" of coming to terms with one's existential attitude becomes self-evident: once the educator chooses herself and the integrity of her project over the system that oppresses her, the experience of personal freedom—or the initial, dynamic upsurge of release from internal bondage—makes choosing in freedom not only possible, but absolutely necessary because to stay in the same place is no longer an option. The only choice for the existential attitude, in action, is to go forward in possibility.

> The truth is that in order for my freedom not to risk coming to grief against the obstacle which its very engagement has raised, in order that it might still pursue its movement in the face of failure, it must, by giving itself a particular content, aim by means of it at an end which is nothing else but precisely the free movement of existence. . . . But this act of passing beyond is conceivable only if

what the content has in view is not to bar up the future, but, on the contrary, to plan new possibilities. (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 29–30)

Nevertheless, and not to be construed as a simplistic notion of self-imposed positive thinking strategies, nor as a light-bulb moment of freedom in which an automatic sense of power over others or over the present realities of neoliberal education is suddenly revealed, the educator's existential attitude rests in her freedom to choose and act from her inner resources of self-affirmation, thereby translating her inward reclamation of personhood into a pedagogy of personhood. The success or failure of the educator's resistance to neoliberal education, at any given moment, might then be seen as the by-product of a more fundamental task of authentic self-reclamation regardless of the circumstances at hand.

How can today's educator, in a real and practical sense, use her existential attitude to advance her personal and pedagogical freedoms, either within or outside the neoliberal educational environment?

Beauvoir recommends that action must be taken in order to begin the process of moving forward toward freedom, of transcending one's present state of oppression. From Beauvoir's perspective, to transcend one's present situation is not some kind of metaphysical, abstract concept. Rather, it signifies a real and deliberate choosing of purpose, vision, and action that aims toward a future, or in de Beauvoir's (1976) words, the "act of surpassing" (p. 27) oneself in the movement forward toward new possibilities. This idea of forward movement can be viewed in the contexts of both productive and resistant forms of action; productive in terms of choosing alternative paths away from the

present reality of existential oppression, and resistant in terms of staying in place (as opposed to leaving the physical situation), but with a confrontational attitude of intransigence to the oppression that holds sway there. While neither form of action promises a guarantee of swift and absolute freedom, Beauvoir yet privileges action aimed toward freedom as the only authentic response to oppression because "there is hardly a sadder virtue than resignation" (p. 28).

In a real and practical sense, I suggest that Beauvoir would likely sanction any and all doable acts of resistance the individual educator might choose, either within the bounded space of her classroom or in the broader, communal space of the school building because, for her, the expression of existential freedom is a moral undertaking that lies in taking action to overcome or move beyond one's situation of oppression (see Chapters III and IV). In terms of productive actions that might be taken in the classroom space, the educator could choose to focus on teaching strategies that emphasize dialogical relationships with her students as opposed to current drill and test strategies that depersonalize and monotonize the teaching/learning process. She could structure the Socratic seminar process within her instructional frameworks to foster critical and creative thinking processes, communication skills, and classroom community. Such humanistic processes and skills call to mind Freire's (2012) "problem-posing" (p. 79) method of education addressed in Chapters III and IV, exercised to inspire and stimulate "the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (p. 81), along with his particular emphasis on education as a "praxis" (p. 79) of liberation (also addressed in Chapters III and IV): "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in

order to transform it" (p. 79). Clearly, the educator's pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood, manifested through productive action as well as in acts of resistance, represents a philosophy of education that can be said to be a praxis of human liberation.

Another area of productive pedagogical action, intended to counter the narrowness and monotony of prescribed curriculum content, would involve a greater emphasis on the arts. Many contemporary critics of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), specifically noting Diane Ravitch in Chapter II, have denounced the marginalization, if not elimination, of the arts and humanities in public education as a real and present deficit in the educational development of students at all ages and stages of schooling. Certainly, we can look to Maxine Greene's entire body of work, also noted in Chapter II, to support her advocacy of the arts and humanities as it informs her existentialist philosophy of education. Advocates of the arts and humanities encourage a renewed emphasis on artistic projects that would provide an alternative avenue from which to approach static core curriculum content with creativity and imagination, humanistic skills that are of great import to human development. Here, I am talking about all kinds of artistic genres: visual, literary, musical, theatrical, etc. While these various suggestions of pedagogical forward movement, to be undertaken in the classroom, might raise cynical eyebrows regarding the "doability" of such strategies, once again, Beauvoir would respond that the will to freedom must be expressed in action. As such, these classroom-based strategies constitute productive actions grounded in humanistic ideals and skills, reinforcing a pedagogy of personhood that benefits both teachers and students.

Beyond the classroom, taking individual action could mean voicing resistance to the neoliberal agenda at staff meetings as well as in private meetings with administrators. It could mean writing critical letters to school board members and voicing open criticism in the public debate of school board meetings. Even so, if her situation of oppression is impenetrable—whether in the bounded space of her classroom, or in the more public spaces of school meetings and board rooms—then the individual educator may yet have to choose another path upon which to tread in her movement forward toward freedom. If such be the case, and in her desire and commitment to transcend that which is intolerable in the given situation, the individual educator might choose to leave that situation in order to pursue more genuine possibilities of existential and pedagogical freedom. I use the following passage in which Beauvoir speaks of the horror of life imprisonment to symbolize the imprisonment that neoliberal educational policies and practices impose upon the existentially oppressed educator. Here, the talk is not only of willing freedom through productive actions (like humanistic teaching methods), but also of revolt under more extreme circumstances when productive actions are not enough to penetrate the walls of neoliberal oppression.

> Life imprisonment is the most horrible of punishments because it preserves existence in its pure facticity but forbids it all legitimation. A freedom cannot will itself without willing itself as an indefinite movement. It must absolutely reject the constraints which arrest its drive toward itself. This rejection takes on a positive aspect when the constraint is natural. . . . But it again assumes the negative aspect of revolt when the oppressor is a human freedom. . . . The prison is repudiated as such when the prisoner escapes. But revolt, insofar as it is pure negative movement, remains abstract. It is fulfilled as freedom only by returning to the positive, that is, by giving itself a content, through action, escape, political struggle, revolution. Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the

given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory. It resumes its
indefinite rapport with itself. (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 31–32)

Linking to Beauvoir's theory of productive action and the negative basis of revolt,
I now understand my leaving the public school system, in 2011, as a negative act of
revolt, my chosen response to my situation of educator existential oppression. I can also
claim that I subsequently translated my personal act of revolt to productive action by
resuming my commitment to education in another realm. Furthermore, and as noted
throughout this study, I have resumed my agenda of resistance to neoliberal education by
advancing my own pedagogy of personhood in the university classroom, speaking my
subjective truth as I engage my students in the study of education (see Chapter IV). While
I do not claim that my chosen path is unique, it serves as a specific example of one
educator aiming to move her existential project forward by re-evaluating it, relocating it,
transforming it, and by all means, reclaiming it. The underlying existential motivation has
been, and continues to be, the need to nourish an inner sense of wholeness that speaks to
personal integrity; in effect, to dispose of the unwelcome psychic stranger that is self-
alienation, what I think of as the force behind the disintegration of my inner being while
suffering from the effects of educator existential oppression.

Both individually orchestrated, productive movements forward and independent,
isolated acts of revolt constitute a kind of leaving, a parting of ways that is embodied
physically, psychologically, and philosophically. But there are other kinds of revolt that
bring up visions of aggression and violence, such as the kinds of revolt advocated by
Fanon, even Freire, in their discussions of colonization and the whole-sale oppression of

a people and its culture. Could we ever consider revolt against neoliberal oppression in this way, as a collective show of force, including physical violence, against the neoliberal institution of education? In my view, aggression and violence are certainly not called for in this context. I am not sure that Fanon would disagree as the constructs of educator existential oppression in a wealthy country like the United States—where people are not forced to become teachers—are far more nuanced than the imposition of colonization over a nation, its people, and their entire way of life as discussed in Chapter III, "Existentialist Perspectives on Oppression and Personhood."

What are some other ways in which the individual educator, as well as collectives of educators, might choose to act for personal and pedagogical freedom? I offer the following questions to reflect my own notions of forward movement in real-world contexts, of actions that might be chosen and through which the individual teacher or group of teachers might express their existential attitudes of resistance and possibility to neoliberal oppression. What about teachers going on strike? Even though we do not have unions in my state, would a teacher strike effectively and meaningfully symbolize an act of revolt constituted by a group of teachers in solidarity for the cause of existential freedom? What about teachers collectively agreeing to call in sick on a pre-designated school day? Would a group of teachers, large or small, ever agree to do this? Or, would their fear of going against the system, potentially losing their jobs, prevent them from taking this more extreme action? Furthermore, and emphasizing the centrality of individual freedom, choice, and responsibility to existential theory, is group action really a viable form of resistance against institutionalized oppression, especially when this form

of oppression is ostensibly sanctioned by school and government leaders? The later Sartre has something to say about this.

In his article, "From Waiting for the Bus to Storming the Bastille: From Sartrean Seriality to the Relationships that Form Classroom Communities," Blenkinsop (2010) asks how a disconnected assemblage of people in a series (i.e., teachers) can give rise to an authentically aligned "group-in-fusion" (p. 187)? "In the group-in-fusion, each self-actualizing being witnesses his/her personal goal align itself with that of the other members of the group to form a common goal" (Blenkinsop, 2010, p. 188). Based on later theories outlined in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1978), Blenkinsop argues that an oppressive situation in which the individual's freedom is at stake becomes a common denominator around which individuals are motivated or inspired to act as subjects together, rallying around a challenge in which each individual is invested. Such a situation suggests a common source of alienation that provokes a response in kind. In *Critique*, Sartre addresses the individual's emerging awareness of alienation as reaction to the "practico-inert" field of existence (Blenkinsop, 2010, p. 187) which, I submit, can be aligned with everyday, existential facticity. Against the facticity of life itself and with awareness of the practico-inert field as the site of unbridled impediment, a group of individuals—fused together in mutual purpose—may be born.

> It is also out of this new awareness of the practico-inert field that the genuine group, as distinct from the series, arises in response to a constraint that is no longer tolerable, and which causes individuals to adopt a new approach towards each other and the series. (Blenkinsop, 2010, p. 187)

Based on this rationale, we would have to assume that today's K-12 public school teachers, as an assemblage of individuals working in the practico-inert field of neoliberal education, do not constitute a group-in-fusion. Instead, they constitute the series, an assemblage of individuals not aligned in a common goal of freedom, as explained by Sartre. On his view, we must also assume that, as a series of disconnected individuals, they do not yet experience existential oppression as sufficiently and collectively intolerable! Having worked in the public school system for thirteen years, I can attest to the fact that I have never witnessed calls for a collective teacher strike or an organized, mass sick day.

Ultimately, as befits a philosophy that privileges individual existence at its core, I defer to the individual educator's will to freedom and the exercise of her existential attitude to pursue her pedagogical project of personhood. Regardless of the uncertain viability of convening a successful group of educators-in-fusion that will collectively and effectively oppose the neoliberal educational regime, it remains imperative that the individual act on her own accord in her quest for personal and pedagogical freedom, choosing to do so both inside and outside the neoliberal educational environment.

Can the Individual Educator who is in Pursuit of Personal and Academic Freedom Be Authentic?

What does it mean to be existentially authentic?

Sartre writes about authenticity in relation to his discussion of bad faith, described as ". . . that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*)" (Sartre, 1956, p. 87). In other

words, to go against oneself is to go against one's moral ground of existential freedom, denying one's subjective truth and, thus, choosing and acting from false or superficial premises that do not support authentic freedom. While the individual may rationalize such choices and actions as convenient or necessary, they are still inauthentic if they are not executed from a disposition of existential freedom that signifies a wholeness of such values translated into action. On this view, the individual self is disintegrated, as opposed to being whole and integrated, because the negation of self renders itself partial, fraudulent, and therefore, inauthentic. In essence, through this denial of self as a freedom, resulting in this disintegration of personhood, the individual becomes "other" to herself and, consequently, experiences alienation. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre (2007) clarifies the necessary connection between existential freedom and what it means to be authentic.

> Consequently, when, operating on the level of complete authenticity, I have acknowledged that existence precedes essence, and that man is a free being who, under any circumstances, can only ever will his freedom, I have at the same time acknowledged that I must will the freedom of others. (Sartre, 2007, p. 49)

All the existential thinkers addressed in this study—from Beauvoir, Fanon, and Freire to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre—link notions of human authenticity to existential freedom and the individual's self-conscious disposition to choose and act in congruence with that freedom and the responsibility that attends to it. Similarly, but in a more simplistic manner, Morris (1966) succinctly defines authenticity as "the awareness of one's freedom" (p. 46), linking existential authenticity to the intention with which each of us responds to the various situations in which we find ourselves.

> We are individually confronted in every waking moment by phenomenal situations to each of which there are numberless responses we could give. But the responses must rise as possibilities in our imagination before they can play a role in genuine choosing. Moreover, no choice is possible unless the free subjectivity is aware of the act of choosing as such. . . . "Choice" means selecting from alternatives in a state of awareness. (Morris, 1966, pp. 46–47)

With existential freedom, subjective awareness, and choice constituting a basis from which to understand existential authenticity, the individual educator who inwardly experiences the need and intention to be authentic to herself and her project will choose a pedagogy of personhood over workplace objectification and dehumanization. However, the struggle to be authentic, personally and professionally, is not an easy or time-limited undertaking. In fact, I suggest that it is a lifelong process with which each of us must wrestle, hopefully getting better at it as we go along. The struggle to be authentic represents a paradoxical striving that calls up, for me, the paradox of existential freedom attached to the limits of responsibility. "*I must strive for personal authenticity in order to be ok with myself. In reverse, I must be ok with myself in order to meaningfully achieve a sense of personal authenticity*" (Lieb, excerpt from class 28 field notes, April 29, 2013). Regardless, if it is freedom and authenticity the educator seeks, she must continue the struggle by choosing to move forward with her existential project of personhood, leaving behind the vestiges of existential oppression.

What are the Implications of a Pedagogy of Personhood for the Future of Education and the Human Community?

Throughout this study, I have advocated for a pedagogy of personhood as a two-fold proposition: (1) as resistance to educator existential oppression and (2) as the site of

possibility for personal and pedagogical liberation from existential oppression. Ideally, and given time, I would add that the institution of education, itself, might also be liberated.

Essentially, I am proposing a choice between two visions of education and pedagogical practice: education as humanization—via a pedagogy of personhood—versus education as dehumanization—via a pedagogy associated with oppressive policies and practices. Stated another way and specifically using the language of the present, historical moment, I am proposing a choice between existential education versus neoliberal education. Stated as such, the choice sounds clear and straightforward enough. However, the way to envisioning the implications and possibilities of choosing a humanizing pedagogy of personhood is far more complicated than it might initially seem. This is because our educational system is now, more than ever, entrenched within the nation's economic and technological infrastructures. This scenario is borne out by neoliberal policies and practices that have effectively reformulated schooling as a training ground for programming/producing a corps of future workers prepared to represent the nation in the 21st century global marketplace: technologically proficient, concrete-thinking, authority-yielding, consumption-focused, and profit-oriented. (Refer to Chapter II for a detailed review of the critiques launched against neoliberalism as an ideological business model imposed on the institution of education). Thus, the neoliberal vision of education is a totalitarian vision that implicates our collective submergence under dictatorial regimes of authority, oppressive institutional structures, and dehumanizing social systems that negate personhood individually and collectively.

In contrast, an existential vision of education focuses on the subjective nature of the individual as the centerpiece of the educational endeavor. Within this vision, a pedagogy of personhood validates and stimulates each individual's development as a self-creator, value creator, meaning maker, and goal setter in terms of defining her existential project. For the individual educator, a pedagogy of personhood implicates not only her subjective stance, but the necessity of bringing that stance to the classroom. I am talking about holding, expressing, and living her humanity with her students so that all involved will experience teaching and learning as a praxis of humanization; a praxis through which individual personhood is affirmed and relationships are forged. "This kind of teaching obviously brings into play the more personal and intersubjective kinds of rapport. . . . it [freedom] is the only vehicle in which genuine *communion* , in Buber's word, can be effected between teacher and learner" (Morris, 1966, p. 152)

What are the implications of a pedagogy of personhood as it relates to the individual student? In Chapter IV, using selected class field notes, I have illustrated the dilemma of the contemporary student's indoctrination into the neoliberal mindset through her conditioning to standardized education as the normative function of the teaching/learning process and of student development as a whole. Specific field notes reveal the visible effects of this conditioning, which I have suggested might be understood as a kind of existential oppression for some students, particularly as it impacts students' ways of being and engaging in the pedagogical process. Initially, many such students unequivocally state that their learning priorities encompass concerns about grades and job preparation. In essence, the pedagogical moment of engagement and

discovery is not nearly as valuable or significant as is the prospect of completing the

degree and obtaining a secure and well-paying job. Ironically, with this kind of single-

minded utilitarian mindset (the neoliberal attitude, so to speak) in place, many students

demonstrate, and sometimes clearly state, their feelings of discomfort with the potential

experiences of self-discovery, self-revelation, and critical analysis that are typical of a

more open classroom environment. In other words, and at least at first, the pedagogical

structure and physical environment of my existentially oriented classroom, designed

around principles of personal and intellectual freedom, is a foreign concept to many

contemporary undergraduate students. As such, I have learned that it takes some time and

the building of trust for students to adjust and feel "safe" in a pedagogical space of

freedom. Nevertheless, and consequently, as an educator committed to this pedagogy of

personhood, I consistently ask myself how I can continue to foster a more meaningful

and deeply existential learning experience for the student? Morris (1966) states, "If

education is to be truly human, it must somehow *awaken awareness* in the learner—

existential awareness of himself as a single subjectivity present in the world" (p. 110). In

this instance, Morris's statement calls up the notion of the existential attitude as it

pertains to the subjective stance of the student in the existential classroom. From the basis

of this claim, Morris provides a portrait of the student who has been educated in freedom.

> A youngster who becomes fully aware of himself as the shaper of his own life,
> aware of the fact that he must take charge of that life and make it his own
> statement of what a human being *ought* to be—this is the individual who has been
> brought beyond mere intellectual discipline, beyond mere subject matter, beyond
> mere enculturation, beyond mere "fundamental dispositions," to the exotic but
> supremely human zone we spoke of earlier, the zone of value creation where

selves create their own selves beyond the reach of teacher and textbook. (Morris, 1966, p. 111)

I have addressed the implications of a pedagogy of personhood as this kind of pedagogical practice pertains to the individual teacher and student. Now, how might we connect a humanizing pedagogy to a conception of community comprised of individuals? In one of her earlier books, *Landscapes of Learning*, Greene (1977) talks about "the need for social *praxis*, about critical consciousness, about equality and equity, as well as about personal liberation" (p. 4), all necessary constructs for conceiving and, potentially, realizing education as a process of humanization. Within a pedagogy of personhood, all such constructs intersect, with the individual being the locus of these humanizing intersections. Ultimately, as individuals needing other individuals with whom to engage in the world—to become who each of us will continue to become—we join together to form community. We can only do this as affirmed individuals who are unavoidably and necessarily invested in the condition of being human.

> We all learn to become human, as is well known, within a community of some kind or by means of a social medium. The more fully engaged we are, the more we can look through others' eyes, the more richly individual we become. The activities that compose learning not only engage us in our own quests for answers and for meanings; they also serve to initiate us into the communities of scholarship and (if our perspectives widen sufficiently) into the human community, in its largest and richest sense. Teachers who are alienated, passive, and unquestioning cannot make such initiations possible for those around. Nor can teachers who take the social reality surrounding them for granted and simply accede to them. . . . transformations are conceivable [and] learning is stimulated by a sense of future possibility and by a sense of what might be. (Greene, 1978, pp. 3–4)

On Greene's view, the unique singularity of the individual student (and teacher) develops more fully and flourishes when nourished by a community of individuals who come together in mutuality of purpose aligned with their individual projects as they are perceived to be in that moment in time. Living and learning, therefore, are evolutionary processes that continue to spiral over time, fed by internal energies of reflection and external energies provided by experiences with others. What better space for such flourishing than a classroom of individuals who can be inspired to construct their journeys by an existential educator who, herself, continues to evolve in her project of living and learning?

What is at Stake?

What is at stake for the future of education, for the individual, and for the human community? I want to introduce the concept of integrity as the emergent theme with which to address this question.

Throughout this study, I have used the word "integrity" to signify an existential state of inner wholeness, reflected in the educator's self-affirmation of personhood, and speaking to the authentic integration of individual identity, subjectivity, purpose, intention, and practice as they inform the educator's existential project. I have consistently referred to the educator's integrity as it represents the holistic alignment of her personal and pedagogical values. While I recognize that integrity is typically regarded as a virtue of human character, I want to reiterate and expand upon the idea of integrity as a conception of wholeness, often applied to objects and natural phenomena, but which can certainly be applied to the existential stance of the individual and to human

development in general. "When it is applied to objects, integrity refers to the wholeness, intactness or purity of a thing—meanings that are sometimes carried over when it is applied to people" (Cox, 2001, para 2). In this conclusion, I intend a concept of integrity that enlarges upon an understanding of wholeness as it relates to the individual educator and her project of existential freedom, to a humanizing conception of wholeness with which to infuse the pedagogical endeavor and, from that context, to an understanding of wholeness as it represents the human experience.

The question remains: How can we apply the concept of integrity, in terms of its properties of existential wholeness and personhood affirmed, to the educational endeavor as a humanizing force that develops and strengthens both individuals and human communities? Such a conception of integrity approaches the teaching and learning process as a living and relational phenomenon, including—actually emphasizing—the immeasurable and empirically incalculable abstractions of human subjectivity and future possibility. On this view, the existential integrity of the teacher, as translated and manifested in the classroom, is fundamental to the integrity of the pedagogical experience as a life-affirming project. In the words of Uhl and Stuchul (2011), I am saying that, as educators, "Our intention [should be] to bring life and relatedness out from the educational shadows and silences and into the light . . . in short, to promote *teaching as if life matters*" (p. xiv). Certainly, I am presenting a conception of integrity that is infused with life-affirming existential values, not to be co-mingled with a twisted conception of integrity that seeks to validate a wholeness or consistency between an evil intention and its subsequent implementation. Having made this stipulation, I want to assert that as

individuals who prioritize freedom, we are each responsible for choosing how we will

manifest and express our integrity—inwardly to ourselves and outwardly toward the

world. In turn, we must each bring our sense of integrity to the social and cultural

institutions that we, as human beings, create.

Unfortunately, the neoliberal agenda does not speak to the integrity of personhood

and individual development as fundamental to its educational mandate. Instead, the

neoliberal response to the existential situation of today's teacher, including any

possibility of improving her situation, is couched in the rhetoric of performance and

investment, or business-model rhetoric. Therefore, even the idea of a pay raise is "tied to

better training that leads to higher graduation rates and other improved student outcomes"

(Westervelt, 2015, para 21). This and the following quote are taken from a recent NPR

(National Public Radio) article, "Where Have All the Teachers Gone?" by Eric

Westervelt, that explores reasons why enrollment numbers in university teacher

education programs are dropping at such an alarming rate today. Note again the business

jargon that infiltrates neoliberal oppressor rhetoric. Here, teachers are positioned as

investments that must be controlled and made rigorously effective through externally

defined and imposed standards and procedures.

> If we could really take control of the profession and increase the rigor such that
> teachers are effective from Day 1, I think that will prove to the public at large that
> this is an investment worth making, and one worth increasing. (Westervelt, 2015,
> para. 22)

There seems to be no recognition of human value, dignity, and integrity in the

language of neoliberal education. As such, it is clear to me that the leaders and

administrator who support the neoliberal view, and who respond to the challenges of 21st century education with this kind of neoliberal language, have truly taken on, or internalized, their own dehumanization in the role of oppressor. Assuming that their language truly mirrors their thinking, they have relinquished the integrity of their personhoods, as well. Having earlier explored this particular phenomenon of oppressor-oppressed dynamics in our discussion of philosophical conceptions of oppression, we can recognize the current abdication of a humane educational agenda as an all too typical consequence of institutionalized oppression in these neoliberal times. This being the case, and with personhood and integrity unaffirmed in the all-important endeavor of human development, I submit that education as we know it today is rendered existentially meaningless.

So, what is at stake, and what can we do about it? Existentially speaking, and in a broad sense, my first instinct is to respond with, "the integrity of the human condition" is at stake. By extension, the integrity of the human condition can only be preserved through recovery of the source of human integrity; that is, the individual. What I mean is this: If we value the integrity of personhood that flourishes in a state of existential freedom; and if we are concerned about what the loss or devaluation of personhood and integrity means with regard to the future of education and the human community, then we must turn our gaze back to the individual educator, looking to her as the human catalyst for transforming a pedagogy of dehumanization into a pedagogy of personhood and humanization.

In the end to *teach as if life matters* is to ground education in the healing of the fractured relationships we have with ourselves and the world. . . . This can and will occur, we believe, when teachers have the support and motivation to actively devote themselves to their own self-actualization. Indeed, the best teachers are masters of themselves as well as their subject matter. Such teachers offer their students a powerful model of what it means to be fully and authentically human! The expression of our full humanity is precisely what these times call for. We believe that if human culture is to flourish in the new millennia, teachers will need to become fearless agents of transformation. (Uhl & Stuchul, 2011, pp. xvi–xvii)

Reflection: A Composite of 2013 Field Notes

I have acquired more nuanced insights about the importance of initiating and encouraging pedagogical conversations with my undergraduate students about the situation of K-12 education today and, in particular, the issue of educator existential oppression. While we address the problems associated with neoliberal education, especially the prescriptive and standardized teaching/testing model, I am careful to position hope and possibility at the center of the teaching/learning process by way of the existential attitude. Therefore, from the perspective of my own existential attitude, I discuss my existentialist philosophy of education that prioritizes the individual—student and teacher alike—as a freely choosing and acting subject. I teach from and about a pedagogy of personhood in which I, as the teacher, reveal myself as a unique individual who has chosen to do the work of teaching. I share stories about my family, my hobbies, and my philosophical musings. In turn, I ask each student to share her/himself with me and the other students that comprise what I believe has evolved into a genuine classroom community.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* specifically addressing the dehumanizing effects of the banking concept of education, Freire makes clear that liberation from educational

structures of oppression cannot be accomplished by replicating the same policies and methods under the banner of a new order of revolutionary leaders. On this point, Freire's (2000) concern is to "call the attention of true humanists to the fact that they cannot use banking educational methods in the pursuit of liberation, for they would only negate that very pursuit" (p. 78).

Bringing this project to a close and summarizing what might be learned from it, I invoke Freire's words as wholly relevant and applicable to the following study "results." First, while educator existential oppression is not predictable or measurable in empirical contexts, it is a phenomenon, in human reality, that impacts the value and effectiveness of the educational project as a fundamentally human endeavor for both teachers and students. Second, this self-study indicates that the oppressed educator can choose her own liberation, her reclamation of personhood, only after she has confronted her condition of oppression with acute self-consciousness and awareness of her particular situation. It is at this point that she finds herself in the existential attitude, the space from which she can choose how she will move forward toward possibilities of freedom. She can choose to resist neoliberal pedagogical practices where she is or move on to pursue her pedagogy of personhood elsewhere. Third, and from the existentialist perspective, the self-liberated educator is compelled to pursue her project of freedom in whatever way doable for her in order to maintain her integrity and, therefore, reject the resignation and self-negation of bad faith. Fourth, in order to reject and cast off her own state of existential oppression, the individual educator must believe that her project is viable and worth pursuing, realizing that her power lies in choosing and acting for freedom in her small niche of the

world, whether or not she can ultimately effect change across the systemic structures of neoliberal education. Fifth, and alluding to Freire's statement above, if we continue to educate according to the neoliberal model of standardization and objectification, we will continue to produce standardized and objectified students and future teachers. On all these points, and from the existentialist perspective, I conclude that it is up to the individual educator to choose herself by choosing a pedagogy of personhood that can give meaning to a situation that otherwise has no personal and pedagogical meaning.

From the perspectives of the existentialists addressed in this study, there are always possibilities in freedom. Once the individual educator awakens to her existential attitude of personal freedom, resistance, and possibility—choosing to pursue a pedagogy of personhood—she begins the process of reinvigorating and reinforcing the existential bond with which those of us who value freedom seek to perpetuate the best of the human condition.

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APPENDIX A

TEN GUIDELINES FOR WRITING SPN'S

In his book, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, Robert J. Nash (2004) provides "Ten Tentative Guidelines for Writing SPNs" (pp. 57–67). Explaining his insertion of the word "tentative" in the title, Nash (2004) states, "They [guidelines] are still evolving" (p. 56). Following is my distillation of Nash's ten tentative guidelines.

Guideline 1: Establish Clear Constructs, Hooks, and Questions.

A construct represents a central theme that integrates the various components of the research study in a coherent and organized way. A hook represents a writing device that is compelling, hooking the reader's attention. The construct and hook can be one and the same in the sense that the study problem, itself, is framed in a compelling and scholarly manner. Thus, in my work, the construct/hook is the problem of the 21st century educator's experience of existential oppression.

Guideline 2: Move from the Particular to the General and Back Again . . .

Nash (2004) states, ". . . in an SPN, every *what* needs a *why*. Every fact needs a hypothesis. Every phenomenon needs a purpose. Most data need insights. Actions need reflection. And they all need a personal story or two to deliver them cogently" (p. 59). As such, the *fact* of existential oppression, as I have seen and experienced it, represents lived experience that requires interpretation, reflection, and story—moving from, or interweaving, the particulars of a personal, self-study to the generalizable situation of educator existential oppression and the possibilities of self-empowered liberation for the

contemporary educator who is intent on pursuing her freedom, personally and pedagogically.

Guideline 3: Try to Draw Larger Implications from Your Personal Stories.

This guideline speaks to the SPN researcher's intended purpose for using her personal experiences and reflections to speak to a specified problem that looms larger than her particular situation, therefore bearing implications for other individuals, for communities, for social institutions, and for the culture at large. Clearly, this guideline informs the purpose of my dissertation project since I claim throughout the study that the current phenomenon of educator existential oppression is an outcome of the dehumanizing neoliberal business model transposed into the realm of public education.

Guideline 4: Draw from Your Vast Store of Formal Background Knowledge.

In terms of this study, guideline 4 addresses the importance of integrating philosophical inquiry and analysis (oppression, personhood, and existentialism via the theories of Beauvoir, Fanon, Freire, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre) with scholarly personal narrative writing. Further, in Chapter II, I provide an extensive, critical discussion of neoliberal education to provide the necessary context for understanding the stated problem of educator existential oppression.

Guideline 5: Always Try to Tell a Good Story.

Thus, narratives are instruments that help us to know about ourselves and others, and to solve problems; they are also tools for us to tell others about our experiences. The reason why these instruments are part of our brain's structure is probably because they have conferred survival benefits on human beings since the beginning of human time.

The use of stories as tools has allowed us to become problem solvers, communicators, and survivors (Nash, 2004, p. 62).

I suggest that when the word "story" is used, most people infer that the story is a work of fiction, even if it holds implications for the human condition, which most fictional stories do. However, from the perspective of SPN methodology, the "story" is a work of non-fiction that necessarily informs and reinforces the revelation of a human problem, standing as personal testimony, to the larger issue under study. My story of personal and pedagogical oppression in the workplace, clearly aligned with traditional scholarly research, is not a mere personal account. Rather, it stands more in the light of Pinar's notion of "allegory" (p. xv) as politically instructive. Pinar (2012) writes, "Indeed, as an allegorical form, autobiography becomes pedagogical political practice for the 21st century" (p. 48). I suggest that "SPN" could be substituted for the word "autobiography" in the preceding quote because, in this instance, the revelation of one educator's lived experience of existential oppression and subsequent pursuit of a pedagogy of personhood can offer resonance to other educators in similar situations and possibly be instructive, as well.

Guideline 6: Show Some Passion.

Relative to this kind of scholarly work, passionate investment in the problem under study infuses the process with subjective meaning making, along with academic credibility, both emanating from the perspective of the scholar herself. At the same time, understanding the purpose of SPN methodology as the intention of bringing the particular to the general so that others can relate and potentially benefit from their own respective

interpretations and conclusions further legitimizes the SPN as a unique scholarly endeavor, informed as it is by both personally lived experience and intellectual fervor. Certainly, I believe this work meets guideline 6 on both personal and scholarly levels.

Guideline 7: Tell Your Story in an Open-ended Way.

While attempting to connect the personal to the universal, it is important to realize that the SPN will not resonate in the same way for all readers. Therefore, the purpose of the SPN is not to convince or coerce, but rather to enlighten, inform, and promote critical thought on the matter at hand. Specific to this study, I address the problem of educator existential oppression for the purpose of bringing into the light of day a pervasive problem that holds great import for the future of teachers, students, and the institution of education; one that deserves serious, critical attention.

Guideline 8: Remember that Writing is Both a Craft and an Art.

Careful attention must be applied to the essential integration of properly crafted scholarly textual writing with the more, subjective components of narrative. The SPN product should represent the appropriate constellation of documented scholarly research with the narrative reflections of lived experiences as they inform the problem under discussion. Craft and art meet as the scholar/writer reflects upon, reworks, and polishes her writing. Throughout my study, I integrate personal commentary and broader narrative reflections with philosophical inquiry. In addition and very purposefully, I use excerpts from collected class field notes to provide the existential, narrative data that highlights Chapter IV.

Guideline 9: Use Citations Whenever Appropriate.

A given for all scholarly writers. In the case of SPN, the issue of appropriately citing sources/using relevant quotations is somewhat more nuanced. Nash (2004) prefers to use the term *apt proof text* (p. 66), short for appropriate proof text, to indicate the necessary inclusion of cited statements and materials to support the purpose and validity of the SPN—as a scholarly written product that, at the same time, validates the situation of the scholar/writer.

> Alluding to too many proof texts means that you actually have very little to say on your own. Alluding to too few means that you have no background for what others have said about what you want to say on your own. The *apt proof text* provides a context, deepens your writing, extends its implications, grounds its insights and, most of all, explicitly acknowledges the contributions of others to your thinking. (Nash, 2004, p. 66)

In my study of educator existential oppression, I liberally cite the existential philosophers that inform my philosophical analyses so as to provide the background with which to support my personal stance. Because every SPN is necessarily subjective and personally conceived by the scholar/writer, the issue of how much to cite ultimately becomes a decision of scholarly/personal balance that the scholar herself must decide.

Guideline 10: Love and Respect Eloquent (i.e., *Clear*) Language.

The SPN aims to effectively frame a substantive scholarly work within and across its personally narrative features. Nash (2004) states that the quality of the research/writing project depends on "direction, focus, organization, and clarity [whether] in a book, dissertation, thesis, or essay" (p. 68). The challenge for me, in using SPN as a research/writing methodology, is to frame scholarly, philosophical inquiry and personal

narrative in language that attests to the effective and essential (in my view) relationship between the two, such as this relationship supports my dissertation purpose, goals, and the foundation of authenticity with which I want to imbue this project.

APPENDIX B

TENETS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Certain terms and phrases hold unique meanings specific to existentialism as a philosophical school of thought. While some of the terms in this list have assumed common everyday usage, their meanings as related to existential theory, specifically the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, are far more complex and very difficult to understand as originally composed by Sartre himself. Then, we must also take into account the fact that Sartre was French, and his work had to eventually be translated into English. Therefore, most of the definitions included here are sourced from the work of Gary Cox (2008, 2009), a British academic and Sartrean scholar, who interprets Sartre's theories in such a way as to make them more comprehensible to the non-academic reader. To reiterate, the majority of the following definitions and explanations included in this appendix are based specifically on Sartre's own writing, *as interpreted* (my emphasis) by Cox. There are two exceptions, "subjectivity" and "intersubjectivity," the explanations of which are primarily based on quotes taken directly from Sartre himself.

- Absurdity—The existential notion of absurdity is rooted in the belief that fundamental existence, the fact of being born into the world, has no meaning of its own. In the face of such absurdity, the life of the individual only assumes ". . . the meaning and purpose [that] each person chooses to give his own existence" (Cox, 2008, p. 10). Choosing, then, serves as the basis upon which the individual can create and ascribe personal meaning to her life in order to alleviate the meaninglessness of an otherwise absurd existence.

- Anxiety—Existential anxiety can be described as the interplay between the individual's awareness of personal freedom and the exercise of that freedom for making choices, taking action, and being responsible for everything she does. Essentially, anxiety emerges from this fundamental awareness of one's *responsibility* for the consequences that result from her freedom to choose (Cox, 2008, p. 14).

- Authenticity—A person who is authentic accepts and affirms her freedom along with the personal responsibility that attends to it, aware that she is a situated being who is always choosing relative to any given situation. Authenticity infers that the individual acts, outwardly, in a manner that is consistent with her subjective stance. Existential authenticity is not some material goal that can be measurably achieved. Rather, it is understood as a lifelong project for which the individual ". . . takes full responsibility without regret for his past, for his present situation and for his actions within that situation" (Cox, 2008, p. 15).

- Bad faith—This term represents the opposite of existential authenticity. As such, bad faith is indicative of living inauthentically by denying, avoiding, or positioning oneself as unable to choose. "In effect, not choosing is also a choice. However, it is an inauthentic person who seeks to avoid or deny the responsibility connected to her freedom, thereby exhibiting what Sartre calls "'bad faith'" (Cox, 2009, p. 81).

- Being-for-itself—Based on Sartre's existential philosophy, this phrase

  represents the individual's consciousness of self as a uniquely existing subject

  in the world; as an identity shaper, a meaning maker, and a value creator. It is

  distinct from "being-in-itself" (Cox, 2008, p. 30) in that "being-for-itself" is

  predicated on the individual's state of self-awareness while "in-itself" has no

  consciousness of its own being.

- Being-in-itself—Sartre uses this term to indicate *being* (my emphasis) that

  simply *is* (my emphasis), the quality of being that is not attached to human

  consciousness (such as an object or creature). It is the starting point of Sartre's

  ontology, if not his entire philosophy, because every phenomenon that Sartre

  describes ultimately depends on being-in-itself for its existence. Alternately,

  the unique property of human consciousness, ". . . or what Sartre generally

  referred to as non-being or being-for-itself, exists as the negation or denial of

  being-in-itself. (Cox, 2008, p. 30)

- Being-for-others—This phrase captures the state of human consciousness in

  which the individual is aware of her relationship to other human beings in the

  world, both as subjects and as objects. " Each person constantly confronts the

  existence of other people, not simply as *objects* in his world, but as *subjects*

  who see him and judge him and reduce him to an object in their world" (Cox,

  2009, p. 37).

- Choice—Existential choice typically manifests as intentional action,

  particularly as choice can be understood as a decision made in the face of

multiple options for possible action. Cox (2008) states that Sartre ". . .
explores the phenomenon of choice as the central feature of existential
freedom. Denying determinism, he holds that people are free and that,
therefore, their choices are genuine choices" (p. 40).

- Existence precedes essence—"Existence (the world, being-in-itself) is
logically prior to essence (being-for-itself, consciousness, ideas, meaning).
Sartre holds that existence is fundamental and that essence is logically
subsequent to existence and arises through the negation of existence" (Cox,
2008, p. 69). In other words, each person comes to physical existence without
a pre-determined meaning or purpose for being in the world. It is the
individual's unique freedom and responsibility to give meaning to her life
through the pursuit of her chosen project. For Sartre, there is no supernatural
purpose or force underlying human existence.

- Facticity—Cox (2009) explains facticity as "The resistance or adversity
presented by the world that free action strives to overcome" (p. 77).
Therefore, the individual's freedom to make choices and take actions with
which to confront existential facticity is fundamental to her lived experience
in this uncertain and contingent world.

- Freedom—Freedom stands as the moral ground of the existentialist
individual's life project. With freedom to choose comes the responsibility to
accept the consequences of one's choices—desirable or otherwise. Existential
freedom lies between what is in the past and the possibilities yet to come in

some future time. "The freedom of the for-itself [the self-conscious individual] consists in the perpetual opening up of the possibilities of being. The for-itself discovers itself in a world of possibilities that it creates by being a temporal transcendence towards the future" (Cox, 2008, p. 86).

- Fundamental project—In simplistic terms, this phrase refers to the individual's project of living, meaning her life path as determined by her choices and actions. In existentialist language, the fundamental project emerges from the individual's "unique *fundamental choice* of himself" (Cox, 2009, p. 108), this choice representing an existentially significant and self-conscious response to a pivotal event occurring early in life. The individual's response to this event signifies "the start of a process in which he chooses actions that affirm or deny his view of himself as a certain type of person. The actions that a person chooses in response to his fundamental choice comprise his *fundamental project* (Cox, 2009, p. 109).

- Human consciousness as "Nothingness" (Cox, 2009, p. 21)—Consciousness is not a thing in and of itself. Rather, it is a relationship to or about something in the world, a consciousness or awareness of something. ". . . phenomena, all the different kinds of physical and non-physical things which comprise the world, are collections of appearances to *consciousness*" (Cox, 2009. p. 25).

- Intersubjectivity—This term represents the various ways in which individual subjects relate to and interact with one another in the world. Sartre (2007) states,

> I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think or will without doing so for or against me. We are thus immediately thrust into a world that we may call "intersubjectivity." It is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are. (pp. 41-42)

- Subjectivity—Existential subjectivity is that inherent feature of being human, linked to consciousness of self as a unique person in the world, a consciousness with which the individual attempts to attach meaning to personal existence. According to Sartre (2007), "Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be, and, on the other, man's inability to transcend human subjectivity. The fundamental meaning of existentialism resides in the latter" (pp. 23–24).

APPENDIX C

OVERVIEW OF EXISTENTIALISM

Historical Background

Scholars and philosophers trace existential, philosophical thought as far back as the ancient Greeks: to Heraclitus, around 500 BCE (Graham, 2011) and Socrates, 469-399 BCE (Nails, 2011). Certainly, the Socratic question concerning how one should live is foundational to existential thinking. Nonetheless, the germination of European existentialism is typically associated with nineteenth century philosophers and theorists, particularly with Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). "It was the Danish maverick Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the atheist and romantic philosophers, Arthur Schopenhaur and Friedrich Nietzsche [Germany], who, in their different ways, set the agenda for what later became known as existentialism" (Cox, 2009, p. 16). Kierkegaard planted seeds of existential theory with his conceptions of (1) the individual as a unique being whose personal subjectivity is her source of truth and (2) passionate commitment as the essential ingredient to choosing and acting upon one's chosen life purpose. For Kierkegaard, passionate commitment took the form of an individually defined, inwardly lived dedication to Christianity. In contrast to Kierkegaard's religious fervor, Nietzsche stressed individual empowerment and passionate commitment to a life purpose that was secular and atheistic.

As a viable philosophical movement—with simultaneous foundations in literature, the arts, and politics—existentialism achieved its height in the modern era of post-World War II Europe, particularly in France where existentialism was intimately

associated with the literary and philosophical works of Jean-Paul Sartre. Fellow

existentialist thinkers and writers of the era included Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger,

Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. Above all, Sartre is

credited with embracing and advancing the term "existentialism" as a philosophical

school of thought and philosophical/literary/political movement.

From the perspective of historical events, the atrocities associated with the

Holocaust and World War II contributed to the apex of existential awareness in terms of

human suffering and the "evils" that men and women are capable of perpetuating against

one another. While the trajectory of modern existentialism carried over to the United

States to some degree, it was limited in cultural affect, aligning more readily with

American literary writers like Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, and other members of the

Beat Generation who began to question mainstream norms associated with post-war,

American culture. However, as a philosophical movement embedded in continental

(European) culture and sensibilities, existentialism did not dramatically challenge the

structure or nature of American philosophical perspectives or American culture, in

general. In his book, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy,* Barrett (1990)

addresses the disparities between continental Europe's philosophical orientation and that

of Anglo-American philosophy, particularly as such disparities have emerged in the

realm of academe. In this regard, Barrett cites Anglo-American philosophical preferences

for objective, positivistic concepts associated with analytic philosophy versus the

continental European preference for an existentialist philosophy of lived experience,

representing real-world concerns for both the individual and for society at large.

According to Barrett, American analytic philosophers of the modern era "dismissed

Existentialism as 'merely a mood' or 'a postwar mood' " (Barrett, 1990, p. 10),

essentially turning a blind eye to the "concerns of the human spirit" (p. 10) because, on

the basis of analytic principles, "philosophic truth can be found only in those areas of

experience in which human moods are *not* present" (p. 10). Moreover, as a comparatively

young nation with a very different set of historical experiences and social perspectives

from that of Europe, the American cultural worldview remained cloaked in "youthfulness

and optimism" (Barrett, 1990, p. 10), unable or unwilling to entertain the uncertainty and

contingency of a more profoundly serious perspective on human existence.

> [Existentialism] was a philosophy that was able to cross the frontier from the
> Academy into the world at large. This should have been a welcome sign to
> professional philosophers that ordinary mankind still could hunger and thirst after
> philosophy if what they were given to bite down on was something that seemed to
> have a connection with their lives. . . . [but] Such matters as anxiety, death, the
> conflict between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of the masses,
> the experience of the death of God are scarcely the themes of analytic philosophy.
> Yet they are themes of life . . . (Barrett, 1990, pp. 8–9)

To understand how an existential theory of life might have emerged, it is

necessary to understand existentialism's view of individual existence as a function of

both freedom and finitude, addressed in the 19th century through the respective

philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both of whom placed singular philosophical

focus on the tension between personal freedom and the uncertain and mortal nature of

human existence. On this point, neither of the two conceived of a specific agenda or

belief system that would yield remedies applicable to all human concerns, nor did either

Kierkegaard or Nietzsche believe that such a system could actually exist. Moreover,

neither one conceived of the "problem" of existence as something outside of the individual—to be conquered externally. Again, the burden falls on the individual to decide how to negotiate human existence. "No concept or system of concepts lies at the center of either of their philosophies, but rather the individual human personality itself struggling for self-realization" (Barrett, 1990, p. 13).

Looking ahead to the 20th century, Sartre actually built upon and extended the theories of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche with his own interpretations of personal freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and responsibility as they inform the individual's life "project" (Sartre, 1984, p. 617). On his view—being free—I am my project, and I am solely responsible for the choices and actions I take to advance (or not) that project. As Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, ". . . the fundamental project which I am is a project concerning not my relations with this or that particular object in the world, but my total being-in-the-world" (Sartre, 1984, p. 617).

Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard, generally regarded as the "father of existentialism" (McDonald, 1996, para 1), spent most of his life in Denmark, having left for about a year during his late teens to study in Germany. Not well-traveled, unmarried, and residing in the same locale for most of his life, Kierkegaard's life was especially inwardly focused. As both a private individual and a public philosopher/intellectual, however, he maintained a very passionate commitment to his particularly personalized and subjective view of Christian faith, self-constructed and deliberately set apart from the religious values and practices of the surrounding social milieu. As such, Kierkegaard expressed his subjectively held

"truths" about religion, individual freedom, subjectivity, and other philosophical concerns with unapologetic criticality toward the prevailing culture of his time.

Often writing under pseudonyms, Kierkegaard's best-known philosophical works include: "*Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, 'edited' by Victor Eremita (1843); *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, by Johannes de Silentio (1843); *Philosophical Fragments: Or a Fragment of Philosophy*, by Johannes Climacus (1844); . . . *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846), [Climacus]" (Wartenberg, 2008, p. 79). Although not published in his lifetime, Kierkegaard also wrote a voluminous number of entries in journals and notebooks, the greater part of which ". . . consists of reflections on a myriad of subjects—philosophical, religious, political, personal. Studying his journals and notebooks takes us into his workshop, where [one] can see his entire universe of thought" ("Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks: Volume 4: Journals NB-NB5," 2014, para 2).

Friedrich Nietzsche

Generally considered of German descent (although during his life, he claimed Polish ancestry), Nietzsche was a brilliant scholar, philosopher, writer, and cultural critic. In particular, as an atheist and existential thinker, Nietzsche viewed religion as a tool of the state as well as the source of power and manipulation for both religious and social institutions, this concern constituting an essential theme across his work. In 1869, at the age of twenty-four, he became a full professor at the University of Basel in Switzerland. However, challenged by poor health, Nietzsche resigned from this position in 1879. According to Wartenberg (2008), "For the rest of his life, he lived a nomadic existence,

wandering from Switzerland to France and Italy. In 1889, he collapsed while watching a horse being cruelly whipped. He never fully recovered and died the following year" (p. 139).

Nietzsche wrote works of both philosophical and literary import. His most notable writings include: *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872); *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1873); *The Gay Science* (1882); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885); *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); *On the Genealogy of Morality (1887)*; and *The Antichrist* (1888). There was some controversy surrounding the posthumous publication of *The Will to Power* (1901) because Nietzsche's sister, a Nazi sympathizer, controlled the editing process. This led to conclusions, by some, that Nietzsche was an early, Nazi sympathizer. However, Wartenberg (2008) refutes this view and states, "In fact, he [Nietzsche] was not [anti-Semitic], and broke with the German composer Richard Wagner, over the latter's anti-Semitism" (p. 139).

Jean-Paul Sartre

As the individual ". . . mainly responsible for both the formulation and the popularization of existentialism" (Solomon, 2005, p. 203) as a particular philosophical movement, the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre runs deeply throughout the discourse of existential theory. His body of work crosses multiple genres: philosophical studies, political treatises, and literary pieces, including plays, novels, and short stories. Some of Sartre's most notable titles include (by order of publication date): *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936); *Nausea* (1938); *The Flies* (1943); *No Exit* (1944); *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946); *Being and Nothingness* (1943); *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1948);

Existentialism and Human Emotions (1957, 1985); *Critique of Dialectical Reason*
(1960); and a later "study of the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert" (Wartenburg, 2008,
p. 19), *The Family Idiot* (1971-72).

Known for his intellectual genius, love of philosophical discourse and the arts,
along with his political activism, "Sartre was the model of the engaged intellectual"
(Wartenburg, 2008, p. 19), particularly during and after World War II. Post-wartime, with
his long-time partner, Simone de Beauvoir (one of the few, well-known female
existentialists of the time) and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "he founded the
journal *Les Temps Modernes*, in which many articles on the topics of the day were
published" (Wartenburg, 2008, p. 19). In fact, Sartre's superior intellect and literary
contributions were recognized with the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature in
1964. However, Sartre refused the honor, preferring to avoid what he felt could have
been regarded as political, institutional, or social complicity with a cultural construct to
which he was philosophically—and very much publicly—opposed (Wartenburg, 2008, p.
19). To this day, Sartre is considered the premier figure in the history of existentialism as
a philosophical school of thought, and his contributions to the canon continue to
underscore contemporary, philosophical understandings of what it means to be an
individual in an uncertain and contingent world.