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This study, *Parents Choosing Independent Education: Personal Advantage or a Moral Alternative*, is a narrative research project that presents the stories of 19 parents who have chosen independent (private) Quaker (Friends) education for their children. Within this research project is the very real tension between public education (that provides ostensibly equal opportunities) and independent education (that can provide opportunities for personal advantage).

I situate the problem in the historical relationship of education and democracy and tie them to the priority of relationships and schools as a place where children learn moral lessons. I discuss the interconnectedness of education, democracy, relationships and ultimately learning to be a moral person in the context of the stories as told by parents who have chosen to send their children to an independent, Friends school. The work of educational theorists and researchers John Dewey, Nel Noddings, Jane Roland Martin, Ellen Brantlinger, and Alan Peshkin provide the contemporary framework from which these parents' stories are analyzed.

Parents' stories are complex and at times present conflicting values and priorities. Some parents talk about quantifiable measures of academic success. Most parents talk about the importance of relationships at school and a curriculum where their children learn moral values. When children are described as happy at school their parents talk very little about academic achievements or standards. However, when children are described

as not happy at school then academics and curriculum standards become a major emphasis of their child's story.

Parents' stories reveal three major themes. Parents talk about needs of children and families, certain conditions when children are happy at school, and relationships and social justice issues consistent with the priorities of Friends education, i.e., peace, community, integrity, simplicity, and equality. Most of these parents express a preference for progressive education and practices that support the development of moral behavior reflecting democratic values. Some parents use the language of Friends testimonies, talking about peace, community, simplicity, integrity, and equality. Other parents use secular language to describe their priorities as they talk about an intentional social curriculum, as described by Ruth Sidney Charney, where cooperation, positive relationships, and conflict resolution are taught by modeling, discussing, practice, and confirmation.

PARENTS CHOOSING INDEPENDENT EDUCATION:  
PERSONAL ADVANTAGE OR A  
MORAL ALTERNATIVE

by

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To George, friend, partner, husband and father of our children,  
with gratitude for all our years filled with love and luck.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Prologue

“This is how it is supposed to be, Susanne.”

Carrie, my former university student, has called to update me on her daughter’s experiences in an independent (private) Friends (Quaker) school (See Appendix A). She talks happily about her daughter’s love of learning in this new environment and her own inclusion into the life of the school. She tells me stories that describe what she calls “unbelievable” examples of how she and her daughter are being cared for and nurtured by this new school community. I find myself responding with affirmations in support of her participation in this school because I am truly happy for Carrie and her daughter. But I am also relieved that Carrie’s decision to attend an independent school has turned out as I had hoped it would. You see, Carrie began to develop insights about what education might be when she read *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (Suskind, 1998) as part of an assigned project in my university class, “The Institution of Education.”

“Are there schools around here that do what I’m reading about in this class?” she had asked me as the end of the semester approached. Out of that conversation grew a friendship and Carrie’s decision to explore independent education for her child.

### **How this Project Began**

I want to share three brief stories about independent education that touched my life and shaped my interest in this project. Bits and pieces of these three stories are intertwined throughout this project. They are all stories of moral visions, a sense of doing something noble, often reflecting an important story of fervor with sacrifice by those who see a vision of education and dare to dream of possibilities.

The first time I saw the movie, [American Dream at Groton](#) I was struck by the contrasts of George Peabody's founding vision of a Spartan education for privileged boys who were the prodigy of elite, and the conflicting values expressed by contemporary students featured in the film. Some talked openly about the desire for power and wealth that is associated with elite independent schools. Other students talked about the call to service that is part of the school's founding vision. The film also shows the conflicting and disturbing impact of an elite school experience on a minority student.

That film pointed out for me the intersection of a *moral curriculum* that seeks to educate children to be civic leaders and the challenge of actually being a community where civility and the common good is truly valued and practiced. The class discussion that followed my initial viewing of [American Dream at Groton](#) challenged me to look once more at the role of independent education in American society. I had not anticipated the anger and outrage expressed by my classmates at the very idea of non-public education.

For a period of six years prior to returning to graduate school I was a senior administrator in a newly formed independent school whose mission was "to educate the

whole child by challenging the mind and nourishing the spirit in a diverse community guided by Judeo-Christian values.” As the chief development officer, I used those words to transmit the vision of what might be. I also knew that behind those carefully crafted words were the courage of a few who could see a *moral vision* and willingly toiled in the vineyards to make that school happen. Classroom trailers were called “cottages” in those early days. Enthusiastic volunteers assembled desks, collated and folded innumerable newsletters, mowed grass, answered phones, emptied their pockets and dug deeply into personal savings accounts in order to establish the school. Tireless enthusiasm abounded in those founding years.

My next encounter with *a moral vision* of education was with the Friends school where I worked for two years. The school lore includes the lived experience of the Heads of School who describe how in the early days of the school they would spend the mornings chopping the weeds that surrounded the trailers that provided office and classroom space. In the afternoons, they would shower and climb into the trailers using a makeshift stairway and proceed with the more professional components of their work, building admissions and developing the curriculum. I have heard the “chopping weeds story” several times and suspect that many independent schools have their own stories of dreams based on moral visions, sacrifice and a desire for basic goodness in education for children.

I too have hopes and dreams about how “it” (school) is supposed to be. I believe that parents who have selected independent education for their children can be a source of

stories that contribute to a broader conversation about education and how schooling might be.

Today, as I read and learn more about education, issues of accountability and school performance, evaluated by standardized tests, dominate the public conversation and national educational priorities (Boser, 2003; Buchanan, 2004; Bush, 2005; Matthews, 2003b; Shapiro, 1998a). I am concerned about what is happening to children. I fear that the founding purposes of education are lost. Today, education seems to be constrained by a narrow vision of purpose with priorities reflecting an economic rather than an aesthetic or ethical curriculum priority (Heubner, 1975). Living in a fair and democratic society is not part of the public conversation about education today.

My conversations about education are from the position of one who has been a parent and employee personally invested in the world of independent education, and as a teacher of future teachers. My university students who want to become teachers confirm for me that the conversation (about what schools can be) must be expanded and include models from the world of independent education that can be seen, heard and felt by those who care deeply about children, but who can not envision alternatives to what they already know.

I have learned that independent schools are “independent” in the sense that they are self-governing with self-determined statements of purpose (Kane, 1991c, p. 7). Independent schools have few constraints from external governmental bodies about the school’s educational mission and curricular priorities. However, this world of independent education, I believe, is misunderstood particularly by those who have never

personally been inside that *secluded garden*. I propose that an opening can be created between the cloistered walls of independent education and the larger landscape of education through story sharing and subsequent dialogue.

In my adult life I have had numerous opportunities to observe and work in schools associated with the Society of Friends (Quakers). As a parent of a student enrolled in a Quaker school, an instructor and volunteer board member at a Quaker College, as a researcher at a Quaker School, and later an employee of that same school for two years between 2005 and 2007, I am familiar with the culture and the educational priorities that permeate Quaker education. The Quaker belief, there is that of God in everyone, is a foundation for a curriculum that focuses on the ideals of a democratic education in that it continually examines fairness, justice, equality and maintains a sacred value for all creation. As such, it is the closest example of which I know that demonstrates what it means to connect educational practices with children to Freire's (2000) call that our vocation is "to be more fully human" (p. 71).

I am interested in what is said by parents who have made the decision to send their child(ren) to an independent Quaker (Friends) school. What do they say about their own values? What do they say that their children need? Perhaps independent education also meets parents' needs. What might these needs be? How do parents who choose to send their children to an independent, Quaker school tell stories about their children's lives? What might I learn about how parents make sense out of their lived experiences by attending to the themes of what they say when asked, "Tell me the story of your child's life"?



Within this research project is the very real tension between public education (that provides ostensibly equal opportunities) and independent education (that can provide opportunities for personal advantage). In Chapter II, Review of Scholarly Literature, I set the stage for the research purpose, parents choosing independent education: personal advantage or moral alternative. There I situate the problem in the historical relationship of education and democracy and tie these two interconnected ideas to the priority of relationships and being a moral person. Those are the issues: education, democracy, relationships and ultimately learning to be a moral person that are examined in the context of the stories told by parents who have chosen to send their children to an independent, Quaker (Friends) school. Anecdotal observation of Quaker educated children who move into public high schools describes them as doing “remarkably well in the integrated scene of public education” and asks, “why?” One parent proposes that it is because “the principles of Quaker education have to be in there working some sort of magic and one of those principles is social justice.”

There is much written and said about education today. Achievements on tests and acceptable yearly progress reports, creating an adequate workforce, reduction of dropouts are all common themes. What is not included in the popular press is a thoughtful conversation with parents that includes their lived experiences and shares their priorities for their children and their families. This project is the opportunity to hear those voices as they respond to the question, “Tell me the story of your child’s life.”

In Chapter III, Methodology, I make the case that narrative methodology is well suited for this research project and place myself within the context of this research

project. I present an in depth analysis of the parent-generated texts. Chapter IV focuses on “needs” that fall into four categories as expressed by parents. In Chapter V, I concentrate on stories that describe certain conditions that reflect the importance of relationships and the happiness of children. Chapter VI is stories of educational priorities reflecting Friends testimonies spoken by people who identify themselves as Quakers and others who do not. In each of these chapters I provide an analysis that draws together common threads that address each unifying theme.

In the concluding Chapter VII, I summarize the major findings of the study and make the case that Quaker education is an educational philosophy by which progressive,<sup>1</sup> i.e., democratic educational ideals are practiced in schools. My hope is that when readers have concluded this work, they will have a better understanding of this aspect of independent education and how it can be a moral alternative in a democratic society.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term progressive in two ways, (1) as a political philosophy; democracy; and (2) as an educational philosophy and pedagogy.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE**

In this dissertation I pose the question, “Is independent (private) education a permissible advantage or a moral alternative?” The review of scholarly literature to inform this question is divided into two sections. I begin with an examination of historical and contemporary thoughts about (a) moral goodness, (b) relationships, and (c) democratic ideals and practices in education. Throughout this literature review I place myself as a parent, teacher and researcher in the context of the major issues that inform the research question: Parents choosing independent education; personal advantage or a moral alternative?

#### **Myself as a Researcher**

My own views on the *rightness* of choosing and participating in independent education have been shaped and reshaped as my ideals and my lived realities collide and merge. My former vision of a sharply focused contrast of black versus white, wrong versus right, has now become an artist’s pallet covered with shades of gray. I see splashes of whiteness that might give light with reflections of “rightness” and splotches of black that cast shadows on today’s shaky and blurred picture that outlines the fragile educational landscape that might grow on the bountiful values represented by democracy. I no longer see a focused picture of clear tones and sharply defined lines to distinguish this image called “independent education.”

I am the product of a working class neighborhood and the child of parents whose world was the academy. When I was younger I imagined the advantage and elitism of private schooling as offensive. The words “private school” or as preferred in that world, “independent school”<sup>2</sup> called forth images of wealth and privilege where I believed that I did not belong and I sensed that others were better or at least more entitled than I. As a child I knew students who attended the local Catholic high school, but that seemed justifiable in the largely Protestant community where I was raised. Catholic school did not seem exclusionary to my way of understanding educational advantages or privilege.

Growing up in a mid-western city dominated by the flagship state university and hearing the weekly roar from football games played at the Methodist-founded college two blocks from my home, the world of education was both a family and community value that embraced me. I was reared in the local United Methodist Church where weekly sermons began with “We are called together as the people of God” followed by words that captured recent headlines announcing local, national and international issues. Scripture selected from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provided insights about how the injustices and traumas of contemporary life could be relieved if we would truly live as “God’s people” in a fair and caring relationship with others.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “independent” refers to the form of governance of independent schools, meaning it is independent of government or external controls. Independent schools, often referred to as private schools, are typically governed by self-perpetuating Boards of Trustees who determine the mission, have financial responsibilities for the school, and authority to hire and fire the chief administrator or “Head of School.” Independent schools operate with minimal external control beyond health and safety standards that might be state mandated. Curriculum and educational practices are subject to the Board’s interpretation of the mission, and are independent of external, state-mandated curriculum standards.

As a young adult, I had little personal experience with the world of independent education other than imagining it as an outsider. It was easier to dismiss the very idea of independent education as “wrong” and unjust than to examine this form of education from a broader perspective. But upon more mature reflection, I ask myself, is this examination of independent education now a means of justifying my personal choices? Is it a means by which I might dim the spotlight focusing a critical examination of issues of advantage or injustice? Or do some forms of independent education exemplify both hope and possibilities that could restore democratic ideals and moral virtues to the larger rendering of the education landscape?

Reading the research by Ellen Brantlinger (1998, 2003) I find myself uncomfortable as she repeatedly refers to self-interest motives expressed by mothers who seek advantage for their own children as they disregard the consequences to other people’s children. Brantlinger’s (2003) research highlights repeated expressions of “conflicted pedagogy” (p. 75) and “false consciousness” (p. 35) by middle class mothers whose talk about other people’s children is based on their own sense of superiority. At best, mothers had minimal experience with those *others* (Brantlinger, 2003; Holme, 2002). Brantlinger’s study includes many academics or wives of academics and I feel closeness to the arguments of justification that permeate her research texts. I know this world of educated mothers intimately. The words of Walt Kelly’s cartoon character, Pogo, leap into my head as I read Brantlinger’s research, “We have met the enemy and they are us.”

Roberta Tovey (1995) questions if interest in “school choice” is a system by which parents with educational information make choices, not because of curriculum or mission, but rather to replicate or establish class and race attendance patterns that match their own or with which they wish to align themselves. My discomfort is not eased by that kind of question.

I chose to send my own children to a wide range of schools starting with a church sponsored preschool at the church where we worshiped. During their elementary years they attended a variety of inner city magnet schools where they rode the bus at least an hour to school and another hour to return home. Later my children attended the public middle and senior high schools in my upper middle class neighborhood. Ultimately one child graduated from a selective but public boarding high school, another graduated from an independent Quaker boarding school, and the third attended and graduated from the local high school enrolling in a combination of advanced placement courses, foreign language classes taught at a regional magnet high school, and numerous college credit courses from the local university. In all cases I had the opportunity to make choices about my children’s education. My first choice began with my ability to choose the neighborhood and therefore the school district where we lived.

Were these opportunities to make educational choice permissible or unjust? Or did these choices provide educational opportunities so my children could be educated in ways that would meet their individual needs and also expose them to a community beyond their immediate neighborhood? My hope falls within the latter option. But is this really what motivates parents as they choose independent education for their children?

Educational choice may be broadly defined as any action by which a parent exercises autonomy to make decisions that impact on education. Therefore, choice can include choice of residential area, private schooling including the use of publicly funded vouchers, magnet and charter schools, “controlled choice” as demonstrated in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and the choice to leave educational institutions by participation in home schooling (Nathan, 1998).

None of these options is truly equitable because everyone does not have equal access to this range of options. Some people, notably those with greater personal wealth, have more alternatives than others do. Those who reside in communities where there is greater wealth for support of schools also have more choices than those who live in communities and regions that in this part of the country are described as “*low wealth*.” The very nature of freedom to make educational choices, or the lack of freedom to have alternatives, is a question of justice and fairness in a democratic society. However, in this paper, I limit this broader discussion of choice to the practice of choosing independent (private, non-public) education.

Is independent education a *permissible advantage*, the question raised by Alan Peshkin (2001) in his book by that title? Is this a matter of injustice—pure and simply undemocratic and in conflict with the ideals of a democratic society? And is there something just not “moral” about seeking non-public education? Or does independent education provide models of schooling that demonstrate the ideals schools can teach, and I believe should teach, how to live in a larger society? Specifically, can independent

education be a moral alternative? I argue that in a democracy independent education has a role, because it can be an example of a “moral education.”

### **Being Good, Relationships, and Democratic Ideals**

First, I review the historical connection of thoughts about goodness and a good society. Second, I discuss what it means to be moral and how this connects to education. Third, I discuss being good in the context of relationships. Then I discuss relationships in the context of education and what thinkers in education propose that school might be *if* both goodness and relationships were important in education today.

There are multiple and competing perspectives of what it means to “be good” and what constitutes a “good society.” For the purpose of this discussion I equate “goodness” with being “moral”—in both cases it is the process of making choices. I equate knowledge with education though admittedly formal schooling is not the only source of knowledge and education. Education is one institution that has an almost universal impact on the lives of children.

From my perspective—being “good” and education, i.e., the concept of “knowledge,” are intimately intertwined. As I tell students in my Institution of Education class, “Being good” by itself can be weak; knowledge alone can be evil.”

The concept of “goodness” as “knowledge” has a historical relationship traced back at least to Plato’s Republic and together they are the link for the creation of a good society. In my years of parenting school age children, I recall plenty of meetings about “rules” that students and parents should follow and little if anything about “goodness” or a goal that school is a place where children learn to live as a good society.



I believe that if “goodness” and the historical ideals of a “good society” were both guiding forces in education, then, the core concept of what school is, as well as what is culturally valued, would be different.

Americans have a sublime faith in education. Faced with any difficult problem of life we set our minds at rest sooner or later by the appeal to the school. We are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which man is subject. . . . *Under certain conditions* education may be as beneficent and as powerful as we are wont to think.

But if it is to be so, teachers must abandon much of their easy optimism, subject the concept of education to the most rigorous scrutiny, and be prepared to deal much more fundamentally, realistically and positively with the American social situation than has been their habit in the past. [italics added] (Counts, 1969, pp. 3-4)

Under certain conditions education can be very beneficial and powerful and I argue that it is possible to explore visions of education with “certain conditions” of goodness where schools and educators might *lead* rather than *reflect* society.

### ***In the Beginning—Plato, Goodness, and Society***

Readings about “moral development” often refer back to Plato’s teachings about goodness, and his emphasis on education as an essential function to “create a good society” is widely noted (Purpel, 1989, pp. 46, 78; Smith, 2002, p. 138). These ideals of “being good” and the visions of a “good society” have been equated with concepts of individual happiness and a democratic society since Plato’s days and are reflected in the principles that founded the United States (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. xli; Bellah et al., 1991, p. 145).

Though Plato's dialogue with his student Glaucon, at first required me to make a leap of belief to connect "goodness" as "knowledge" I find myself returning to the written words of Plato as well as analyses that support this position (Waterfield, (Trans.) 1993, Reference line, 505b; Gutek, 2005, p. 39). Socrates declares that "goodness" is the source of anything that is moral, but that "knowledge of goodness is inadequate." While there is a "usual view of goodness" as pleasure, Socrates posits "knowledge constitutes goodness" (Plato, Waterfield (Trans.) 1993, reference line, 505b).

As you also know, however, my friend, the people who hold the later view (that goodness is knowledge) are incapable of explaining exactly what knowledge constitutes goodness, but are forced ultimately to say that it is knowledge of goodness. (Plato, Waterfield (Trans.) 1993, reference lines 505d).

While this explanation seems circular, we are to understand that "goodness" and "knowledge" are equated.

### ***Goodness and American Democracy***

French social philosopher Alexis deToqueville, describes the uniqueness of American democracy as he observed it in the 1830's, noting the American emphasis on individuality. He proposes that American mores have contributed more than laws to the maintenance of democracy. American "habits of the heart" as deToqueville calls them, function to counter the potential excessiveness of individualism through concerns for neighbors and "a fundamentally egalitarian ethic of community responsibility" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 38). A key "habit" identified by deToqueville is the sense of responsibility for the other as commonly expressed by the American practice of community participation through volunteerism. We must ask, has education today become legislated

to the point that the “habits of the heart,” “goodness” as responsibility for others is no longer a dominant value fostered through education? And if so, why?

I argue that there are at least three major trends that have impacted on contemporary American education and diverted this institution from the founding connection of goodness and knowledge: (a) silence on education’s historical purpose to foster the growth and flourishing of the individual, (b) reemergence of cognitive theory as the dominant learning theory, and (c) the decline or absence of moral language to foster serious conversation about the role of goodness in education. I address each of these areas.

### **Education’s Purpose**

John Dewey is often cited as the major American thinker who articulates the relationship between education and democracy (Gutmann, 1987; Noddings, 2002; Purpel, 1989). In his “Pedagogical Creed,” Dewey (1998) states his belief in the relationship of education and participation in society.

School is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that *form of community* life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends. [italics added] (p. 224)

Dewey (1998) believes that “through education society can formulate its own purposes, can organize its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction it wishes to move” (p. 228). Dewey positions the obligation for the creation of a good society within the responsibilities of the

individual. This can and must be taught (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). He attributes the shift in educational goals from an emphasis on individual growth and development to nationalist and civic priorities to the influences of Prussian thought during Napoleonic times. This shift, the state being oppressive or shaping the individual, instead of collective individuals shaping a civic society, i.e., democracy, becomes a critical issue in education.

Education became a civic function and the civic function was identified with the realization of the ideal of the national state. . . . *To form the citizen*, not the “man,” became the aim of education. . . . This shift marked a change in the goals of education to be disciplinary training rather than of personal development. (Dewey, 1916, pp. 93-94)

This Prussian model of education as adapted in the United States focuses on authoritarian and nationalistic needs. In contrast, Dewey articulates a vision of education that reclaims democracy. I believe that this frames a major tension within education today. Is the function of education to support the flourishing of the individual, as in to become a *good individual*, or is the function of education to meet the needs of the state, as in being a *good worker*? Dewey’s writings give voice to the current challenges that must be confronted if there is to be restoration of the relationship of individual “goodness” and the purpose of education:

There is the great difficulty, each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of *the best possible realization of humanity as humanity*. [italics added] (Dewey, 1916, p. 95)

Dewey concludes his analysis of the relationship of education and the creation of a “good society”:

The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind. . . . One of the fundamental problems of education in and for a democratic society is set by the conflict of a nationalistic and a wider social aim. . . . Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a *national* state and yet *the full social ends* of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted? [italics added] (Dewey, 1916, p. 97)

Today, contrasting these two aims, education for national aims, and education to foster wider social aims, including the flourishing of the individual—Dewey’s question seems prophetic. David Purpel (1989) analyzes this “corruption” or crisis of American education and posits that American “reservation toward serious education can be said to be rooted in our traditional aversion to elitism and aristocracy” (p. 7). As a result, despite the concern for others that is exhibited through admirable community volunteerism and philanthropy, “America’s most distinctive virtue” (Payton, 1988, p. 105), Purpel believes that there is a lack of serious conversation about what education might be, particularly if the conversation is about moral or societal purposes.

Education surely requires knowledge of the learning and maturation process, knowledge of content, language skills, rhetoric, technique and interpersonal relationships. . . . What is required in addition to this knowledge and these skills is a commitment to a vision of *who we are and what we should be*. [italics added] (Purpel, 1989, p. 12)

“What kind of a country are we where students don’t learn that it is not acceptable for people to be hungry, or homeless?” Dr. Purpel boomed out in the class entitled Moral

Dimensions in Education and again in his course on Curriculum Planning. Both times as I sat in his classes experiencing this encounter with Dr. Purpel's disturbing question, the room filled with future school principals and Ph.D. aspirants sat silent.

"He's absolutely right," I have thought many times since. The fact that this question is being asked, is due to multiple and, I believe, conflicting views of what it means to be "moral" or to be "good" and the pervasive lack of connection between serious exploration of the answers to mission and belief statements about the purpose of education and the role of teachers.

Sidney Bijou (1976) summarizes the moral nature of humankind as falling into three major patterns of thought: (a) St. Augustine believed that a child was born sinful, to be "saved" by the use of punishment from adults who were fulfilling their moral duty; (b) John Locke saw children as "morally neutral" to be influenced by education; and (c) Rousseau believed that children are born good or pure, and corrupted by adults. These differing views of basic human nature, Bijou (1976) posits, are the foundation for three parallel theoretical frameworks on acquisition of moral behavior. Their significant proponents are: (a) psychoanalytical theory based on Freud, who believed that the child is controlled by in-born drives that must be given up; (b) social learning theorists such as Robert Sears and Albert Bandura, who see children as "neutral," shaped by parenting and child rearing practices; and (c) cognitive-development theorists, notably Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, who believe children have an internal sense of what is good or moral (p. 109).

I am a product of the “Sputnik Age.” I remember the morning when Mr. Williams, my civics teacher, asked about the important news of the day and I had failed to do the standing assignment, read the morning newspaper. Fortunately, Cate, who was sitting in the front of the class, waved her hand wildly and was called upon to answer. It was with both relief and fear that I heard her announce that the Soviet Union had launched a space satellite.

Being “competitive” in the academic world—both being among the “best” within my own school and being as a nation “best” in relationship to other world powers—was part of my educational experience. Lessons on being “good” and talk about a “good society” came from home and the neighborhood Methodist church.

It was with horror that my high school guidance counselor heard my rationale for wanting to be a child development major which was located in the School of Home Economics at the University, rather than a science major. “Don’t you know what kind of people are in those classes?” she asked me, implying that “smart people” did not study about home or little children.

But I did become a child development major, parent, teacher, and community volunteer in human services. I find myself aligned with those theorists who believe in the powerful impact of mentoring and modeling on learning, though I do not believe that children are “empty.” I side with those who see children as fundamentally good with a uniqueness that deserves to flourish. As one working on a fuller understanding of what it means to live a life guided by faith, I find the concepts of unconditional love and forgiveness or “grace” as two guiding principles for living (Gulley & Mulholland, 2004).

All of these ideas connect to a vision of “goodness” and “good society” as guiding forces in education. As a result, I find the ideas of moral goodness as “responsiveness to need” particularly compelling though challenging to apply to my daily life and educational practices.

### **Two Voices on Moral Development: Justice and Responsiveness to Needs**

Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor (1988) trace the dominance of the “cognitive” perspective of learning to the launch of Sputnik, in the late 1950’s, which triggered the American educational priority of competition in mathematics and science (p. xi). Gilligan et al. (1988) posit that the impact of a cognitive approach has been to convey “a view of people as living in a timeless world of abstract rules” (xi-xii). It is this model of moral development and moral maturity based on universal reciprocal rules that Gilligan (1982) challenges in her research detailed in In a Different Voice.

Gilligan begins her attack on established cognitive theories of moral development and the supporting empirical research because of the extensive use of male subjects. “Inattention to girls has been noted as a lacuna in the literature on adolescence, which raises the question: What has been missed by not studying girls?” (Gilligan et al., 1988, p. x).

To see self-sufficiency as the hallmark of maturity conveys a view of adult life that is at odds with the human condition, a view that cannot sustain the kinds of long-term commitments and involvements with other people that are necessary for raising and educating a child for citizenship in a democratic society. (Gilligan et al., 1988, p. xii)



Gilligan's research, which included girls and adult women as well as male participants, proposed that moral behavior falls into "two moral voices signaled different ways of thinking about what constitutes a moral problem and how such problems can be addressed or solved" (Gilligan et al., 1988, p. xvii).

From the perspective of someone seeking or loving justice, relationships are organized in terms of *equality*, symbolized by the balancing of scales. Moral concerns focus on problems of oppression, problems stemming from inequality, and the moral ideal is one of reciprocity or equal respect. From the perspective of someone seeking or valuing care, relationship connotes responsiveness or engagement, a *resiliency of connection* that is symbolized by a network or web. [italics added] (Gilligan et al., 1988, p. xviii)

Gilligan attributes the observed differences between men and women's sense of what is moral to the almost "universal" practice of women caring for children. "In any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (Chodorow, as cited in Gilligan, 1982, p. 7).

These two voices of what it means to be good extend into the broader ethical conversation. Is being "good" a matter of laws and universal rules, or is it, as some post-modernists theorize, about individual responsibility for relationships with others? The work of Thomas McCollough (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (1993), which draws heavily on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, expands on the second perspective of goodness—as relationships with others.

### ***Goodness and Relationships***

This second voice, the morality of “the connected self” described by Gilligan reflects many of the ethical issues raised by post-modern ethicists (Bauman, 1993; McCollough, 1991; Murray, 2002). The question of what is “good” is viewed in terms of a complex and secular society, rather than as a “gender issue” with an essentialist explanation as Gilligan theorizes.

Noddings (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003, 2006), Martin (1992), and Bauman (1993) describe our modern times as a shift from the stability of an intertwined home and economic system such as an isolated family farm existence, to the emergence of commerce with the resulting separation of home and family life from the economic sustenance. As a result, instead of an emphasis on individual *moral choices made or not made* morality is based on *universal rules* to be obeyed or that support self interest [italics added] (Bauman, 1993, p. 83) Yet, *it is through “relationships” that “goodness” or a “moral identity” of individual “goodness” is formed.*

With the increased complexity of modern society, Thomas McCollough (1991) sees the emergence of language that supports universal rules to support *bureaucratic institutional systems* that include schools. Like Noddings, McCollough sees institutions functioning from “rules” rather than a response to individual needs.

[Bureaucratic] language is a very specialized language, restricted to rules laid down from above and allowing little discretion to the bureaucrat. The aim is not mutual understanding on the basis of communication but the transmission of information from above to be accepted and obeyed. Social relations are converted into control relations. *Persons are turned into clients*, to be treated on the basis of bureaucratic rules rather than the person’s individual needs. [italics added] (McCollough, 1991, p. 82)

Bauman (1993) observes that contemporary society is where individuals function in a world that includes “misclassified strangers,” unknown “aliens” in addition to a community of persons known as “neighbors” with whom one has a sense of relationship (p. 149). With modernity, Bauman (1993) contends, “we look in vain for the firm and trusty rules. . . . It transpires sooner or later that following the rules, however scrupulously, does not save us from *responsibility*” [italics added] (p. 20). The problem with “rules” even those that are named “justice” is that there is no requirement to know or to have any kind of relationship with *those who are viewed as strangers*, or any obligation to discover those who may be totally unknown or perceived as “aliens” [italics added] (Bauman, 1993, p. 149).

Justice can be “sterile” (Bauman, 1993, p. 124). This is exactly what becomes problematic in education. When students, their families and community are “Other” there is an absence of relationships and an absence of a personal responsibility for goodness. How have we come to this state of affairs and what does goodness mean from this perspective?

Bauman (1993) sees moral code as having shifted from clergy, to philosophers, to the contemporary use of law (as in a justice view of morality) thereby diminishing or replacing an *individual responsibility* for goodness (p. 29). He summarizes the dilemma of modern society:

We know now that we will face forever moral dilemma without unambiguously good (that is universally agreed upon, uncontested) solutions, and that we will never be sure where such solutions are to be found; not even whether it would be good to find them. (Bauman, 1993, p. 31)

Universal rules (justice as reciprocity and equality as theorized by Piaget and Kohlberg) negate the need for the development of individual moral choices (Bauman, 1993). Morality, being good, as defined by Bauman does not have rules and a predictable course of action. It is “the encounter with the Other as Face” (Bauman, 1993, p. 48); it is inequality, no equity; not asking for reciprocity (which Bauman considers a business transaction), unbalanced, non-reversible character, non-contractual and not based on duty. This is not a morality based on laws, bureaucratic procedures, or a clear sense of direction other than to *respond to a need*.

At times I find it tempting to avoid a moral conversation in education in part because of the historic separation of church and state, and even more so because of significant differences in religious interpretations, even within a single faith tradition. Yet, in reality, in most aspects of educating children, moral decisions and goodness “comes with the territory” as David Purpel and Kevin Ryan (1976) so clearly point out (pp. 44-67). As a parent, I have feared moral indoctrination of my children particularly by those who seem to have rigid rules about what is right. Yet, not to address moral issues is to be remiss in the education of children. In an attempt to not indoctrinate, in the absence of communication about goodness, I fear our educational system has taught something else—that “goodness” and the goal of a good society are not important values or the domain of public education. As a result the certain conditions (Counts, 1969, p. 3) under which goodness and the good society are educational goals, are, I believe, left to non-public schools.

### *Education and Goodness*

David Purpel (1989) describes the current education emphasis on standards, tests, accountability, school schedules, and even teacher compensation as “trivial educational issues” and makes a plea for moral goodness as a guiding force in education.

The recent flurry of educational reports do not, for example, reflect or propose anything approaching a *fundamental reconceptualization of the schooling process*, much less anything in the way of a serious social/cultural critique. . . . none of the reports speak to the necessity for fundamental cultural and social changes even though it is well understood and accepted that schools *reflect* more than they shape policies and beliefs. The public is once again given the distinct message that schools and education can make serious changes without parallel changes in the basic conception of schooling and in cultural beliefs. [italics added] (Purpel, 1989, p. 3)

If “goodness” were a major force in education there would be two significant changes in schooling and cultural beliefs. First, the language of education would reflect a desire to deal with real “moral issues” that extend beyond the limitations of fundamentalist religious language and second, response to the needs of the individual child would be a primary concern.

Nel Noddings (1999b) elaborates on the educational significance of the contrasting moral voice. She posits that justice alone, i.e., rules as grounding for what is moral, is inadequate for equity in education.

[A] justice orientation often prescribes formulaic remedies and then pronounces the problem theoretically solved—remaining inequities are charged to faulty implementation—and too often, it [justice] seeks an outcome, higher achievement, that it cannot produce. (Noddings, 1999b, p. 12)

Two examples clarify Noddings' emphasis on caring for the "other" as a moral response in contrast to justice as universal rules: desegregation and national curriculum standards. With regard to the implementation of desegregation plans for public schools, Noddings proposes an alternative scenario that would not have resulted in the loss of educational leadership and destruction of community for black children, teachers and families.

Insisting that all children be cared for . . . would have opened the way for discussion of alternatives. In such a discussion, participants would have to *describe the goods that they hold in common and those on which they may differ*. It is not possible to care adequately for people without responding to their needs and interests. Universal rights, handed to people whether or not they seek them, cannot compensate for *losses of identity, group respect, and community feeling*. [italics added] (Noddings, 1999b, p. 12)

The current interest in implementation of national curriculum standards and the current practice of national and state testing standards, particularly the federal legislation, "Leave no child behind" provides another example that challenges universal rules. In this example justice implies sameness as both realistic and a positive step in education. In Noddings' opinion, "nothing could be as *unjust as an attempt to achieve equality through sameness*" [italics added] (1999, p. 13). Coercion toward sameness "produces resistance and weakens the relation" (1999, p. 13). In sharp contrast, the concept of "caring" would suggest that policy would reflect "continuing attention of adults who will listen, invite, guide and support them" [children] (Noddings, 1999b, p. 13).

From a care perspective there would be respect for all forms of honest work. . . . Justice draws our attention to the unfairness of a situation in which large numbers of children are deprived of the potential material benefit of schooling. Care

cautions us to look at *individual* children before we recommend a remedy and listen to those whose aspirations, interests, talents, and legitimate values may differ from our own. [italics added] (Noddings, 1999b, pp. 14-15)

David Purpel defines moral as “a term that focuses on principles, rules and ideas that are related to *human relationships* to how we deal with each other and with the world” [italics added] (Purpel, 1989, p. 66). As I listen to the students in my Foundations of Education class, I become very aware of their ability to use a form of “moral language” particularly when discussing social justice issues. “The Other,” if this is a gay person, has been described by students in my classes as “an abomination.” “The Other” who happens to live in a trailer surrounded by an unmowed yard has been described as undeserving of compassionate support. Public discussion and students’ reflective journal writing at times reflect what Purpel (1989) describes as “ritualistic affirmation of a particular and narrow religion” (p. 54).

“I’m a Christian, therefore, I don’t believe in it,” a student says in response to an assigned reading on teachers’ responsibilities to proactively deal with homophobia in the classroom (Risner, 2002, pp. 209-219). I tame my desire to shout, “What don’t you believe in? You don’t believe these students exist?” Instead, I point to the two words I have written on the board “dignity” and “safety.” Everyone had agreed, after I told a story about a gay teen’s suicide, that these were “rights” of every student and their family, regardless of the family configuration.

“I never realized that as a teacher I would have to learn about the things we have talked about in this class,” a student shares in class as she reflects about what she has had a hard time encountering this past semester. It has been a difficult semester as we have

talked about inequities in education that perpetuate established social class privileges, institutional racism that challenges students' core beliefs about prejudice, their own included. And perhaps most difficult of all, they have had to face the reality that as a teacher, regardless of their faith traditions, they must consider the dignity, safety and needs of students whose lives some have dismissed up until now as immoral. "I feel as though I have been cheated in my education," a student shares with the class. "You probably have been," I answer, "but now you know the difference and you will not cheat the students you teach."

It has been difficult for many of the students to talk about goodness and a good society for everyone including those who they have been taught to see as "morally deficient," or as "strangers," those who do not speak English who are "taking jobs away" from family and those they know as neighbors. Talking about what it means to be good through "care, concern and connection," (Martin, 1992, p. 34) for others like those some have met through their service learning experiences, has slowly evolved during the semester, and only for some. It is difficult for many students to reexamine their own understanding of what is moral and consider the very basic nature of children.

Making the choice to be good as an *individual* in order to have a *good society* I believe is too painful for some. Asking the moral question, that McCollough (1991) raises— "what is my personal relation to what I know?" (p. 83) —is hard when being "moral" has been based on rules universally applied, whether based on legislative rules or religious dogma; when being good supports a belief in the "bootstrap" philosophy that says every one who is "willing" can achieve the American dream; and when freedom and



the good life means a style of liberty which translates into the right to be free from interference and connection to others, “negative freedom” as Maxine Greene calls it (1988, p. 16).

There are visionaries who see the relationship between goodness and education who share glimpses of what that might challenge us to do today. “*We do have to learn how best to respond to this most human of all impulses—to be my brothers’ and sisters’ keeper*” [italics added] (Purpel, 1989, p. 45). Purpel (1989) sees American culture based on a rich political, moral, intellectual and religious heritage. That heritage he proposes can be used as *source of strength* to reclaim goodness in education and American life. Returning to the Socratic tradition, Purpel (1989) reminds his readers that “the proper function of education is to teach virtue and, moreover, that the appropriate pedagogy for such an endeavor is one of critical examination of conventional thinking” (p. 78). This is what I believe it means to place goodness or as Purpel (1989) calls it “*sacredness*” at the heart of education (p. 79). Repeatedly, the voices of visionaries call for education to reflect a model of connectedness as in community, relatedness to others *including the stranger*, and *cooperation* instead of competition (Masters & Holifield, 1996). Douglas Heath (1994) and Heath and Heath (1994), in their extensive study of excellence in individuals and schools uses the word “hope” to revalue what it means to be excellent and restore a value of “goodness.”

***What we learn at school.*** As I reflect on my own best school experiences, I recall sixth grade with Mr. Logan when the entire class participated in creating a historical mural on the chalkboard. The artists contributed to the aesthetic appeal, the academically

inclined contributed content, and the entire class seemed to be involved with the creation of a visual history lesson. The project consumed days and covered the entire blackboard that stretched from east to west on the north wall of the classroom. I recall the debates about what should be included and how this might be portrayed, revisions which were made with a swipe of a damp cloth, and the new creations developed. The air and wood planked floor were filled with flakes of colorful chalk dust as we reworked that project. The popular girls who would later be high school cheerleaders, those who loved discoveries through books, those who were neither popular nor academic were, as I recall, engaged with one another as we created this massive project that dominated our academic space, minds and relationships with one another.

It was about that same time that Mr. Logan explained to us why he wore the solid metal brace that shimmered brightly beneath his pant leg as it grasped the heel of his sturdy black leather shoe. He had been shot in his leg in the Korean War, he said, as he showed us his award, a Purple Heart. After he demonstrated how he could balance himself on the playground climbing poles, holding his body parallel to the ground supported by his arms, I no longer noticed the limp as he walked, but instead saw the strength of will as well as the pain that comes from knowing war. I have not forgotten those lessons learned in Mr. Logan's class, the joy of discovery and creation with others, and the reality of war; both visions I now know came from the impact of relationships.

What I learned, my proficiency in these lessons did not appear on my report card. Such lessons would not be evaluated as acceptable or not acceptable yearly progress

(AYP) for Huntington Elementary School. Nor do I believe these lessons would be seen as valuable enough to receive credit under teacher accountability, as we know it today.

One of my children's happiest years in school was in a church sponsored kindergarten with no report cards or grades, only parent conferences and informal visits. The day generally began with science and mathematics. "What is the temperature today?" Mrs. Stephens would begin. "How much warmer or cooler is this from yesterday?" "How many of us are here?" "Who is missing? How many are missing?" Mrs. Stephens was just warming up, as students would collectively evaluate the questions and scramble to fill in charts that recorded data posted all over the room, measuring, evaluating, comparing insights on the state of things on any given day. This opening activity, though clearly emphasizing scientific observation and an emphasis on "scientific language" (Heubner, 1975, p. 225), also emphasized who are we today and how are we? What is going on with *us*? Bringing a new baby brother to class was just as important as the daily weather warm up.

Informal groups gathered regularly to write books in Mrs. Stephens' class. I have vivid memories of my exuberant five year old retelling at home about cooperative work tightly bound by a common project that involved drawing, writing, collaborating on new words and their possible spellings, while expanding on the written and illustrated details as ideas were transferred to paper with fervor and excitement. Each day I would hear about the news, weather, who was missing from this circle of friends, and hear of literary achievements documented in the hand drawn and carefully folded latest first edition that

was taken home in a child-determined rotating system that seemed to be fair to all the fledgling authors.

This was a happy year that shaped the foundation for love of learning, a sense of self-direction and competence, a sense of wholeness, and closeness with a community of friends who all felt known and loved. Heubner (1975) would describe this as a curriculum that espoused an “esthetic value”—not necessarily measurable, but definitely “felt” (p. 227).

As I learn about education today, such visions of joyful engagement are not what I observe or hear about. My young neighbor tells me about the first week of school. The important news to share with me is the discipline policy, a system by which this second grader has learned that his first infraction puts him on first base. “That’s okay,” he tells me. The second infraction puts him on second base, “That’s okay too,” he assures me. A third infraction he tells me puts your name on third base. “That’s not okay. They send a note home.”

“Schools improve on federal goals” (Buchanan, 2004), is the bold headline of my local newspaper. The article goes into a lengthy explanation of margins of statistical error and how this impacts on what is considered “passing.”

No Child Left Behind requires racial and socioeconomic subgroups within a school to make a minimum score for that school to meet its overall goals. . . . If just one subgroup falls short of that minimum score, the entire school fails. . . . Grier [Superintendent of Schools] said that *the subgroups that tripped up most schools* are special education students and, at the middle and high school levels, limited English-speaking students. [italics added] (p. 3)

Reading this and similar versions of education news, I do not have visions of connectedness, compassion, interest in others, or see words that reflect a commonly shared and espoused vision of what education might be or concern for others. I do see language that fosters hostility toward those who *trip up*, the others. At the very least I sense a disregard for the reality of many students' lives.

A recent U. S. News and World Report article describes “The 100 best high schools in America” announcing that today education is about being *best* as measured by numbers of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and scoring high numbers on exams created to measure learning in those classes. The justification for this definition of *best* according to this article is “because schools that push these tests are most likely to stretch young minds—which should be the fundamental purpose of education” [italics added] (Matthews, 2003b, p. 49). I find myself asking, how are minds being stretched, and in what directions?

The article continues to tout the values of AP and IB courses because they provide honors level work for a broader range of students, particularly underrepresented minority and low-income students. Increased AP offerings are cited as having the effect of “turning schools around” concludes Nicholas Lemann, recognized for his research on the history of the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). [Advanced courses have] “become a wonderful and effective way to produce a massive upgrading of the high-school curriculum” (Lemann, as cited in Matthews, 2003b, p. 49).

Another article describes cries of foul play due to new accountability standards that make schools in “the best districts” “fail” due to “achievement gaps” [that] haunt

many suburban schools nationwide” (Boser, 2003, p. 44). The article describes education as surrounded by issues concerning state-mandated accountability, minimum standards, and test scores in an environment of decreased school funding. “High expectations and focused efforts can help those [low income and minority] kids whether in the cities or the suburbs, ace state tests.” This same article concludes with *proof* that good education is possible despite realities of poverty and racism in schools [that] “are clear about what they want kids to do, organize teachers methodically around those subjects and test frequently” (Boser, 2003, p. 44). What about what kids want to do, love of learning and self-command, I ask myself, as I read about *best* schools?

Though these articles in the popular press do not tell the entire story of what is important in public schools, they do use language which reflects major forces from the outside, that include exams, standards, and accountability. Examples of alternative models with other priorities are cited, but the author indicates that these are generally found in independent, parochial, charter, or special laboratory schools described as “islands of reprieve” from the dominant discourse and policies (Matthews, 2003b, p. 54).

When teaching undergraduate education majors I like to set the stage to connect education with the *importance of relationships*. To help students understand their role as teachers, I typically I assign the Declaration of Independence along with a piece by Cornel West (West, 2003) for the second day of class where we learn about and practice dialogue. Students are shocked at parallels they can now see between the two readings though they are written over two hundred years of separation; one composed by a man whose silhouette they readily recognize, the other by a man who most have never heard

nor seen until I show a brief video clip of West. “Things haven’t changed much” is a common response from those who can move beyond the initial response that West is a “Black” man. We begin our class conversation from this new awareness of one man’s visionary founding of a nation and today’s reality as experienced by another.

The third day of class, I assign an imaginary tale by Polish author Janusz Korczak (1992). It is about a teacher who becomes a child, recalling his role as a teacher while reliving child-like interpretations of school encounters, friendships, and relationships with teachers and parents. I ask my students to share in class what they can relate to and what they can not.

“I never thought about children having the right to dignity.” “I always thought that my job as a teacher was to be sure that children *respected* adults.” Selected stories of *loving school* are followed eventually by stories of *hurt, loss of dignity, consequences from unintended infractions of school or adult rules, failures in learning and sense making, and the absence of connectedness* to their teachers or parents, much like Korczak’s story, When I am Little Again.

Elliot Eisner (as cited in Awhée et al., 2004, pp. 36-37), describes what is learned *because it is absent* from the official curriculum as the *null curriculum*. Two areas fall into this definition: cognitive processes that are *stressed or disregarded* and the subject matter that is *included or excluded*. When science is taught without including the ramifications that new discoveries may make life better for some while proving to be disastrous for others, *something* is being taught in this emphasis. When history is taught without telling the stories of *all* the people something is being taught about those

included and those excluded from the lesson. When art is about the mechanics at the exclusion of fostering “wide awakesness” (Greene, 1988, p. 23) to the human condition, then *something is being taught*.

When schools are described in ‘technical or economic language’ (Heubner, 1975, p. 223) they are also experienced as “productive institutions meaning producing agents and cultural forms needed by the economic sector” to borrow the words of Michael Apple (1995, p. 41). Under these conditions, the very concept of human relationships is not a priority nor is it addressed as part of a core mission of education.

In so many of our encounters with children, both as parents and teachers, we are guided by *purposive-rational thinking: we plan, strategize, instruct, correct, monitor, and control*. There is something *deeply wrong* in all this and paradoxically, when we see that something is wrong, we are inclined to use the same procedures more rigorously. We find it hard to give up the tendency to use prescriptive technologies . . . . In education, as in parenting, the *key may be relation, not control*. [italics added] (Noddings, 2002, p. 26)

***School as home.*** Jane Roland Martin (1992) and Nel Noddings (2003) envision education grounded in the concept of “home.” Martin refers extensively to the need to revalue that, which is broadly concerned with domestic life, as she recreates a vision of schooling that is a “school home,” building largely on the educational model of Maria Montessori (Italian educator who specialized in schooling for very poor children).

Noddings, likewise, begins her theory of education with the same interest in “home.”

*“The best homes everywhere maintain relations of care and trust, do something to control encounters, provide protection, promote growth and shape their members in the direction of acceptability”* (Noddings, 2002, p. 123).



Home is where we experience being cared for and we learn to care (Noddings, 2002, 2003; Martin, 1992).

We learn to cultivate things . . . We cultivate not only fields for crops and pastures but gardens for our houses. We cultivate interests, talents, and manners in our children and in ourselves . . . It is at home that we learn (or fail to learn) to care for people, animals, plants, objects and ideas . . . Children learn to care for things as they watch adults exercise care and are invited to participate in care taking . . . (Noddings, 2002, p. 165)

Both Martin and Noddings attribute our current state of affairs in education to the *devaluing of the domestic*. Martin (1992) calls this disregard of all things traditionally associated with the lives of women “Domephobia” (p. 155). Domephobia is coupled with an emphasis on economic “value”—specifically paid work, generally outside the home and associated more with the stereotypical lives of men. The major challenge we face is that ideals of liberalism, freedom to be independent, to not be interfered with, “negative freedom” (Greene, 1988, p. 16), though a highly valued ideal within the United States, *does not provide an adequate answer to meet children’s needs*. “Liberalism makes a faulty start when it bases its tenets on the mature, rational being; second, its emphasis on freedom creates major dilemmas in how to relate to beings who are not (or are thought not to be) fully rational” (Noddings, 2002, p. 70).

Martin draws parallels between the deprived family lives of children nurtured in Montessori’s “Casa dei Bambini” of the early 1900’s and the lives of children described by Jonathon Kozol (Martin, 1992, p. 26). The dilemma posed by both Martin and Noddings is that, in reality, many children today live in a home that provides neither

Martin's Three-C's, care, concern and connection (Martin, 1992, p. 34), nor the conditions described by Noddings as characteristic of "best homes."

Lest Martin's vision of school as "home" be thought of as a pipe dream with no foundation, she draws a connection between her vision of school as "home" to the words from the constitution of the United States, "*ensure domestic tranquility*" [italics added] (Martin, 1992, p. 164). Martin's position is that there is historical relationship of education to the creation of a tranquil society that can be traced back to the writing of Plato's Republic. Domestic work to assure tranquility is a requirement for daily life in community. School as home ensures domestic tranquility, which Martin believes is a richer version of democracy and citizenship than the model of school, as we know it today.

"Dare we teach for private life?" Noddings asks before responding to her own question:

I think we must. A caring society will be sure that all its people have *at least adequate housing material resources and medical care*. Beyond satisfying basic legitimate needs it must ask how it can best encourage the kind of encounters that will support the development of competent, caring, fully alive and interesting people.

Our present emphasis on academic learning for all is a *misguided effort* at doing this. We suppose that by giving all children a formal opportunity (that is, by coercing them) to learn the subjects once reserved for the privileged, we are thereby giving them all a chance at the good life. We skip over the essential starting place when we fail to recognize the home as first and primary educator. [italics added] (Noddings, 2002, p. 299)

Schools that are more like home become the foundation for the development of people with the capacity for care for others and the moral priority to do so. “When school is ‘home’ classmates are seen as family, . . . the citizens of our nation become kin. When the domestic tranquility clause is reclaimed . . . the poor become our family’s poor and as such America could not ignore them” (Martin, 1992, p. 177).

Jane Roland Martin (1992) and Douglas Heath (1994) both cite Montessori-based education as a model of schooling where relationships are a core component of the curriculum. Heath, himself a Quaker, cites the research of Kenneth Hardy on Quaker Schools, in addition to his own extensive research on education and concludes:

Quaker schools have distinctive climates; they share among themselves a widespread communion of value. . . . The consensual decision-making process that Quakers use to conduct their business fosters talking . . . Quaker schools were perceived as more open, accepting and empathetic than other schools. (Heath, 1994, p. 317)

### **The Democracy Argument**

I have reviewed historical ideas about what it means to be moral, specifically contemporary thoughts on relationships and knowing and responding to the needs of others. This concept of being moral, (relationships with The Other in contrast to moral behavior as equal and reciprocal) I argue is an essential component of a moral education, which is also a democratic education.

In this section I address what I call “The Democracy Argument” that positions education and democracy together but then raises the question about the role of independent, non-public education. I ask what is it about a democracy that has an impact

on the ethical issues related to independent education, or for that matter, any form of choice in education? I then argue that there is *more* to the phenomena of sending a child to independent schools than can be resolved by answering the democracy argument. I believe that there are at least two significant problematics that collide with the position that public education is the only form of education acceptable in a democracy. First, the legitimate interest in progressive education coincides with democratic practices, but “elite academies [independent schools] come closer to realizing progressive [education] ideals than public schools” (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 76). Second, there are significant challenges to implementing a moral curriculum in a secular state.

Had someone told me before I became a parent that one day my own children would attend neighborhood public, magnet, public selective, and independent (private) schools, I would not have imagined the story I have already told. Like many participants in this research project, I grew up with the pattern of attending the school that was closest to my home. However, with each lived experience of schooling, I have gained greater insight into the role of choosing education and the impact on my children’s lives and more recently the impact of my right to choose on the lives of others.

When I enrolled my children in public magnet elementary schools located away from my white majority neighborhood, they attended schools that were either racially balanced or where they were a white minority presence. These magnet schools were created as a means to foster voluntary desegregation of schools using an admission lottery formulated to reflect gender and racial equality. I believed that I was doing the right thing. However, from the perspective of some Black parents, I learned many years

later while participating in a community discussion group on race and reconciliation, *my children took away spaces from their children in their neighborhood school.*

Choosing education, whether by choosing a residential area because of perceived quality of schools (Holme, 2002), participation a special or magnet program, or choosing to attend a non-public school is a conundrum of complex, multiple and competing issues. Choosing a school can be self-serving, unjust, and therefore undemocratic, or exercising parental responsibilities for appropriate child rearing and responding to a child's needs. Enrolling a child in independent schooling raises conflicting values related to issues of democracy, justice, equality, responsiveness to needs, as well as questions of personal advantage because of privileges not available to everyone. The following excerpts come from personal conversations on this subject and these words reveal a few of the multiple and competing values:

- An ethics professor: "If everyone can't have it, it isn't ethical." But then after a pause, "if I had children, I would probably home school them."
- Another professor, when discussing the topic of choosing education and special programs for selected students, "As long as it isn't at the expense of others, it is all right."
- A parent currently involved in an independent school, "What impact does my child's presence or absence at a particular public school really have on what happens educationally to anyone other than my own child?"

The value and importance of an educated public for the establishment and nurture of a democratic society is traced to the days of Plato's Republic (Guttek, 2005; O'Hare, McLaughlin, & Reitzug, 2000). The founding of American public schools is traced to the writings of Thomas Jefferson who envisioned education for the masses in order that they

might participate in self-government (Guttek, 2005, p. 187). Jefferson’s writings reveal a public education plan for all (in reality only for white men) through the third grade and additional education for those who would be selected by a “merit system” and those who could afford it (Guttek, 2005, p. 188). This tension of equality of opportunity, a recognition of the need for education of all people in order that they might be self governing, and excellence that might realistically be available for and achieved by only a few, continues today to be conflicting in a country whose founding reflects values of freedom, liberty and justice.

Amy Gutmann summarizes part of the dilemma that must be addressed in a discussion about the relationships of education and democracy:

These are difficult times because we are difficult people. . . . The tension . . . between *individual freedom and civic virtue*—poses a challenge for educating Americans. It is impossible to educate children to maximize both their freedom and their civic virtue. Yet Americans want both—although some people are willing to settle for freedom for themselves and civic virtue for others. Far from obvious, however, is how our educational institutions should come to terms with the tension between individual freedom and civic virtue. [italics added] (Gutmann, 1990, p. 7)

American educational goals have historically reflected the tension between freedom of the individual as espoused by John Stuart Mill in the fifth chapter of On Liberty and John Dewey’s emphasis on looking beyond the individual to determine the role of education in society. Mill saw government involvement as evil and an infringement on individual freedom.

A government cannot have too much of the kind of activity which does not impede, but aids and stimulates, individual exertion and development . . . A State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes—will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished . . . (Mill, 1935, p. 396)

While not specifically addressing the issue of public education, Mill elaborates on his views of the evils of excessive government as he argues for the value for individualism.

Government operations tend to be everywhere alike. With individuals and voluntary associations, on the contrary, there are varied experiments, and endless diversity of experience. What the State can usefully do is make itself a central depository, and active circulator and diffuser, of the experiments resulting from many trials. Its business is to enable each experimentalist to benefit by the experiments of others, instead of tolerating no experiments but its own. (Mill, 1935, p. 394)

Mill's words lead me to believe that he would probably not approve of a state-mandated curriculum, testing or accountability standards, or the justifications for the current practices in public education that constitute today's hidden curriculum of social control (Vallance, 2003) or replication of social class (Anyon, 2003).

Restrictions of governmental power are justified, according to Mill, because of "the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power." To support his position, Mill suggests these possibilities:

If roads, the railways . . . the universities, and the public charities, were all of them branches of the government; . . . if the employees of all these different enterprises were appointed and paid by the government, . . . not all the freedom of the press and popular constitution of the legislature would make this or any other country free otherwise in name. (Mill, 1935, pp. 394-395)

Though today we do have extensive public, i.e. governmentally paid employees in our state universities and our public schools, by implication, using Mill's perspective, independent schools, with non-government appointed employees (and independently controlled curricula) contribute to freedom.

A contrasting point of view is presented by John Dewey (1900) who recognized the need to judge education for its effectiveness in helping the *individual child* make progress in physical development and the ability to read, write and figure, and growth in the knowledge of geography and history. Dewey also believed that there was a role for public education in development of a *free society*.

All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are at one. *Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. . . . it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social, view [of education].* [italics added] (Dewey, 1900, pp. 3-4)

Mill values freedom of the individual above constraints and interference of government. Dewey sees larger societal responsibilities for the growth of the individual in order to preserve democracy. These are two very different views about the rights of the individual and the responsibility of society. These contrasting views reflect the alternative sense-making processes that I believe undergird the dilemma posed by participating in and supporting independent education in a democratic society.

Educational political theorists use words like “social justice, equality, and citizen empowerment” to describe democratic educational goals (Fishman & McLaren, 2000).



“A democratic society must educate all educable children to be capable of participating in collectively shaping their society,” declares Amy Gutmann (1990, p. 3). Ellen Brantlinger (2003) describes a democratic education as one that includes children of *all social classes in all classes*. A democratic education would not permit advantages for those children who have persuasive, educated, privileged parents who advocate for their own children at the expense of other people’s children.

Gutmann’s position to support religious nonpublic schools espouses the value of diverse styles of education in a democracy:

The democratic purposes of primary education include teaching children a common set of democratic values that are compatible with a diverse set of religious beliefs. *A better alternative to prohibiting private schools would be to devise a system of primary schooling that accommodates private religious schools on the condition that they, like public schools, teach a common set of democratic values.* A mixed system of this sort would better fulfill democratic purposes than a purely public one, which refused to permit even the most strongly committed parents to send their children to private schools. [italics added] (Gutmann, 1987, p. 117)

I find myself asking, on what grounds might independent education be permissible and not blatant injustice that is self-serving? Amy Gutmann (1987) emphasizes that “a primary purpose of schools is to cultivate *common democratic values* among all children, regardless of their academic ability, class, race, religion or sex” (p. 116).

But what are those educational values? Two values stand out as justifications to support non-public education; first, a commitment to *progressive education* that by

definition reflects democratic values and second, a priority for an *intentional moral curriculum* that can and will address issues of social justice.

In addressing efforts to renew democratic education, Nel Noddings (1999) argues that uniformity of educational standards may in fact “fail to encourage the sort of rational political discussion that provides the very foundation of liberal democracy . . .”

[Educational renewal] takes seriously the judgment of John Dewey that a democratic society “must have a type of education that gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of the mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.” (Dewey, as cited in Noddings, 1999a, para. 3)

John Dewey (1916) believed that democracy was “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87). His vision of education concluded that education should reflect “what the wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be the community want for all of its children.” (Dewey, as cited in Gutmann, 1987, p. 13). However, Gutmann (1987) challenges this educational goal because of “the threat of democratic repression and discrimination remain” (p. 14).

A democratic society must not be constrained to legislate what the wisest parents want for their child, yet it must be constrained not to legislate policies that render democracy repressive or discriminatory. A democratic theory of education recognizes the importance of *empowering citizens to make educational policy and also of constraining their choices among policies in accordance with those principles – of non repression and non discrimination – that preserve the intellectual and social foundations of democratic deliberations*. A society that empowers citizens to make educational policy, moderated by these two principled constraints, realizes the democratic ideal of education. [italics added] Gutmann, 1987, p. 14)

Gutmann's theory of democratic education which builds on Dewey's vision of progressive (democratic) education is examined in Ellen Brantlinger's (2003) extensive research on the ability of middle class parents, specifically mothers, to shape public educational policies and practices making them repressive and discriminatory to other people's children.

Brantlinger (2003) defines progressive education as child-centered, problem oriented, interdisciplinary and multicultural.

Students construct knowledge and acquire competencies and skills as they need or want them when provided with a stimulating environment. Learning takes pace in different ways for particular children because they each select what is meaningful to them from phenomena in their surroundings. The role of teachers is not to directly deliver information . . . but rather to facilitate intellectual, social, and affective growth . . . by acknowledging and building on students' own prior knowledge and skills.

Because it is understood that children learn in various ways at different rates, and diversity is expected and valued, curriculum is developed so as to be accessible and relevant to students' achievement levels and learning styles. Evaluation is flexible and individualized; it measures personal accomplishments and does not make comparisons between them . . .

Progressive's agendas include *structuring schools as model moral inclusive communities that allow students to practice the behaviors necessary to take an active part in a democratic society*. [italics added] (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 62)

Given the democratic ideals of progressive education, Brantlinger (2003) then explores the question of why it is not more prevalent in public education. She considers five possible answers: (a) conservatives block progressive agendas for schooling; (b) conservative practices are easier for teachers to implement than progressive practices; (c) traditional conservative practices are naturally self-sustaining; (d) the current logic of

control mitigates against progressive schooling; and (e) Progressive schooling has few supporters among influential classes.

It is this fifth option that Brantlinger (2003) explores in depth. She concludes that middle class educated mothers, though they say they support progressive educational ideals, when they actually talk about educational practices, they express a preference for traditional education because it *advantages their own children in public schools*.

The progressive narrative introduction [of mothers in Brantlinger's research] served the function of establishing the participants' status as a liberal. Once a progressive image was set, mothers could reject 'theoretical' progressive school alternatives by naming 'realistic' constraints supposedly without damage to the valued image. They could then make conservative statements that meshed with their actual desires for their children's schooling . . . Inevitably, mothers' discourses about schools terminated with their advocating rigorously academic, tightly sequenced subject-bound, highly evaluated, Western civilization-oriented curricula. (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 76)

Brantlinger concludes that while progressive education is consistent with democratic ideals, it is not espoused by those with power to determine educational practices. Educated middle class parents, specifically mothers, do not support *progressive education* because *it dismantles hierarchy and would not advantage their children in relationship to other children*.

Brantlinger (2003) conjectures that progressive education was endorsed during the 1950's and 1960's because of economic growth and prosperity. However, with the advent of affirmative action and multicultural and bilingual education that emerged in the 1960's, "cultural capital—the 'source and product of middle class advantage in transmitting the division of labor to offspring'—is threatened by devaluation" (Shapiro,

as cited in Brantlinger, 2003, p. 77). Therefore, Brantlinger concludes that in order to maintain power, mothers in reality do not value and support progressive education for their children. Middle class educated mothers believe that their children “*need direct and systematic instruction in the culture of power in order to continue to excel over children of lower classes and to compete with children of their own class*” [italics added] (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 78). However, the presence of progressive education in elite independent schools, Brantlinger (2003) concludes, is acceptable to parents because these parents have sufficient resources:

So parents do not have to worry about their off springs’ competitive edge on tests and other ranking systems in a time of economic uncertainty for others. Also, for them [elite families] academic achievement and attainment may not have the same meaning and importance for adult status and material outcomes as it does for the educated middle-class or the lower ranks of the middle-class. (p. 67)

### **A Moral Education**

The paucity of democratic public education as envisioned by Dewey, the loss of public involvement in education particularly with the increased bureaucratization of schools and the enactment of state and federal mandates for standards, and the manipulation of public education by educated parents to benefit their own children, all these realities are overwhelming losses for American society. The need for a just, ethical, moral education is quite apparent. Though there are numerous legitimate questions about the fairness of the existence of independent education in a democratic society, public education as it exists today, I believe, does not satisfactorily reflect “associated living” which is how Dewey (1916) describes a democracy, (p. 87).

As I listen to my college level teacher in training students talk about class management techniques that they are either being taught or that they observe in their on-site school internships, I find a void of any real examination of fairness, justice, and education so children can function with reasonable autonomy in a free society. While a single semester of a course on “The Institution of Education” is better than nothing, I often wonder, how can I hold back the destructive hurricane force winds that support external control with a fifteen week class that seek to give glimpses of sunlight in the names of freedom, equality and justice?

Many of my students express religious views that Marcus Borg (2001) describes as fundamentalist. Borg summarizes this faith position as belief in Biblical literalism, strong doctrinal traditions, moralistic interpretations, patriarchal legitimacy, exclusiveness of their own faith traditions, and “after-life oriented” perspectives (Borg, 2001, pp. 11-12). I find myself frequently referring to the Declaration of Independence in hopes of drawing their attention to another cherished document that deals with an alternative vision of “rightness” for American living. Gutmann describes what I am doing as teaching “civic religion.” She reconciles the individual with the democratic state, not the bureaucratic state.

Civic religion, best described as ‘democratic humanism’ ought to be taught in our public schools. It embraces the virtues and habits that are necessary for flourishing constitutional democracy. Those traits include religious toleration, mutual respect, free inquiry, honesty, self-discipline-the essential tools of a society characterized by vigorous self-government. (Gutmann, 1988, para. 4)

I am relieved to find an authoritative voice like Gutmann's to support my teaching practices. When I talk to my students and even some personal friends about a moral curriculum or moral issues in education I find myself needing to preempt a dialogue about what might be considered wedge political issues and say, "I am talking about what it means to treat people with fairness, compassion and justice in American society." Upon reflection about the impact of religious fundamentalism on social and public policies, it seems strange and yet not so amazing to have to explain what I mean by the word *moral*.

Richard Rorty (1999) positions this dilemma as a political tension with opposing foundational beliefs.

When people on the political right [which I believe now dominates the discourse about public education] talk about education, they immediately start talking about truth. Typically, they enumerate what they take to be familiar and self-evident truths and regret that these are no longer being inculcated in the young. When people on the political left talk about education, they talk first about freedom. (p. 114)

This tension of the right and the left Rorty believes is resolved with the conservative right i.e., truth will lead to freedom, having control over elementary and secondary education, and the left i.e., freedom will lead to truth, is found in the world of non-vocational higher education.

Schools are places that represent forms of knowledge, language practices, social relations and values that are particular selections and exclusions from the wider culture. As such, schools serve to introduce and legitimate particular forms of social life. . . . *Schools actually are contested spheres* [italics added] that embody and express a struggle over what forms of authority, types of knowledge, forms of moral regulation and version of the past and future should be legitimated and transmitted to students. (Giroux, 1988, p. 126)

At hand is the conflict of educational visions that contrast “banking” with “problem solving” as described by Paulo Freire (2000). Rorty’s analysis of education provides me with insight into the current state of affairs in education and a better understanding of what I learn from the college students that I teach. However, I can not agree that it is acceptable that the education of young children must continue to be constrained by this age and educational level truce that Rorty describes.

Young children deserve a moral education, which I believe is also a democratic education. By this I mean, young children deserve nothing less than to be taught about fairness, justice, compassion, love and care for one another, and how to live with one another—including those who are “different.” This should be an educational mandate here and now not one that is postponed for the post-eighteen year olds fortunate enough to attend college or university with the freedom to study liberal arts.

Gutmann (1987) distinguishes between two forms of moral teaching: teaching the “morality of association” and teaching the “morality of authority” in a way that describes my concerns.

Children who learn only the latter [morality of authority] lack the capacity (or willingness) to distinguish between fair and unfair, trustworthy and untrustworthy authorities. *They also fail to identify with the purposes of social institutions that do not continually serve their self-interest or force them to cooperate.* They have never learned to judge the commands of authorities or their own actions according to whether they live up to their terms of fair social cooperation.

Given the democratic goal of sharing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, schools that teach children the *cooperative virtues* are uncommonly successful and minimally problematical . . . Empathy, trust, fairness, and benevolence—virtues at least as common among women as men—mark the morality of association. [italics added] (Gutmann, 1987, p. 62)



Gutmann however, quickly acknowledges that schools are “not terribly effective in teaching autonomy” since moral autonomy means

doing what is right and good because it is right and good, not because teachers or any other authorities demand it, some of the most effective lessons in moral autonomy may result from the opportunity to disobey an authority whose demands are not perfectly just or fair. (Gutmann, 1987, p. 62)

Therefore, I believe we must formulate an educational curriculum that effectively answers Sarah McCarthy’s concerns when she asks and explains, “Why Johnny Can’t Disobey” (McCarthy, 2003, p. 35).

As I listen to future teachers justify behavior modification schemes where red, yellow and green cards or sticks are pulled to signal good and bad consequences of behavior, I ask them to consider, “what are we really teaching our students? Where do we teach children that we do the right thing because it is right, not because of the promise of ice cream on Fridays, smiley faces, or fear of hatch marks on the board?” My college students do not like those questions. They know that they like the college age version of teacher rewards, which are A for being good instead of stickers with smiley faces. Only a few of them understand what it means to be good. These are the ones who do not fear external authority, who love to learn and who are fully engaged with the challenges raised by the realities of the class we are sharing.

My instincts tell me that not just any school will effectively teach moral autonomy and what it means to do what is right and good simply because it is right and good. When school discourse is dominated by test results as a measure of goodness, conversation about a moral curriculum with a commonly understood, articulated mission

that is communicated consistently and effectively through words and actions, seems like another world. This is not the world of public schools, as I understand them to be today.

The very idea of moral education becomes problematic for me. In my mind, I can not separate what is ethical and moral from a discourse that also includes my religious beliefs. As a “Christian in process” as I describe myself, I am currently working on what it means to be loving and forgiving, two tenets of Christian faith, though not necessarily limited to that religious belief. For me “God” or an understanding of God is how I can imagine what it is to love and be loved, what it means to be forgiving and forgiven. Both those ideals, love and forgiveness, are connected to all that I envision in good teaching and what can be taught about relating to others with fairness, care, and compassion. But I cannot separate that from religious talk. Even Gutmann’s words about learning moral autonomy as a lesson that can be learned from opportunities to disobey, fit with my religious world of understanding. But because my own college students seem to have a restricted view of moral I often resort to referencing *democratic* moral ideals that I also see as articulated in the founding documents of this country. I grasp and cling to Gutmann’s *civic religion* in order to create a conversation in the public space of my classroom about a moral curriculum.

I cherish and value the concept of separation of church and state. These are foundational priorities in this country. I find myself supporting efforts that minimize religious practices within public schools that can be oppressive to some, such as Christmas concerts and school prayer. I say this while I also long for an educational environment where *public morality* is a curriculum priority, where it is permissible to

explore *faith without indoctrination*, where the *sacredness of our fellow beings* is truly part of curriculum priorities, and where there is freedom to become human, which Freire (2000) describes as our “vocation” (p. 66).

I empathize with the words of Svi Shapiro as he grapples with the morality of sending his own child to a Jewish school where her faith traditions will be nurtured:

These are not easy times. Such [meaningful and enduring] communities are not easy to find. All of us must somehow find the capacity for commitment in a world where all beliefs seem uncertain, visions uncertain and social relations fragile or broken. Yet the need to find a place in which *our commitments are shared and our identities confirmed* [italics added] is the necessary ground of our being as moral agents in the world. (Shapiro, 1998a, p. 239)

Being a moral agent is not just a calling for those who share a minority faith in a dominant culture. I believe that this *need for a place* of shared commitments and identities may be more prevalent in the wider population. It is from this longing for a shared moral community, that I find myself reverting again and again to the question of independent education, is it a permissible advantage, or an injustice? It is unjust from the perspective of lack of inclusiveness of “everyone.” But I sense that inclusive schools are rare, if even that, in both the public and independent education worlds. Though the democracy argument is a strong one to support public education, it I fear does not have many examples from which to spawn offspring, and there is nothing to say that a truly inclusive public school will also practice progressive education or have a truly moral curriculum. Therefore, I find myself attracted to educational visions that allow or foster the ideals of progressive education, that are child-centered, where a curriculum can be clearly stated and where teachers have sufficient autonomy to teach what they believe is a

moral curriculum. Independent schools I argue have some of the conditions that foster both progressive/democratic education and a moral curriculum.

Pearl Rock Kane (1991a), Director of the Klingenstein Fellows Program for independent teachers and administrators at Teacher's College, Columbia University, describes the characteristics of independent schools: clarity of mission, *moral education that permeates the academic, co-curricular activities* and community life, a “culture rather than rules that defines standards and expectations” [italics added] ( p. xvii), self-governance (p. 7), a self-defined curriculum with few if any state mandated courses (p. 9), self-selected students, self-selected faculty that encourages autonomy (p. 11), collegial decision making, and small size (p. 12).

There are examples of schools that practice moral curricula. Kim Hays (1994) compares the moral education in Quaker and military schools. She analyzes how “being good” is intentionally taught in these two contrasting models of education and portrays “morality as a living thing.”

[A] process of virtues conscientiously practiced or deliberately rejected, duties under taken or avoided, decisions debated, and dilemmas faced or ignored. . . . [Hays shows how] membership in a particular moral tradition can affect the traits people value, the problems they perceive, and the words they use to describe apparently similar situations.

*Quaker and military boarding schools, by their efforts to communicate a strong moral code, a desire to serve others, and a sense of responsibility, stand out in contrast to the average public school, where few teachers have the time, opportunity, permission, or training to teach such lessons.* [italics added] (Hays, 1994, pp. viii-ix)

David Purpel (1998) cites another example. The Society of the Sacred Heart and the Network of Sacred Heart Schools “endeavor to deepen their most cherished religious and moral commitments.” Purpel (1998) elaborates, “this endeavor provides educators interested in grounding their work in transcendent moral and spiritual vision with a powerful model . . . it offers energy and hope to those struggling for a better world” (p. 211).

As described by Purpel, The Sacred Heart Schools seek to address the challenge of *excellence in education with a moral curriculum*, which is exactly what Alan Peshkin (2001) finds so disturbingly absent after his year long study of “Edgewood Academy.” Peshkin describes the school in great detail, as a nonpublic secular college preparatory institution, whose academic and co-curricular programs, faculty, facilities, and students exude privilege and excellence in everything except a curriculum that addresses moral justice.

It is this very contrast of “moral curricula” or the absence of clearly stated moral curriculum that concerns me and that I seek to uncover. Therefore, I continue to ask, is independent education a personal advantage or is it a moral alternative? The democracy argument could conclude that it is not permissible. However, given our nation’s need more than ever today for a democratic and moral curriculum, we might look at independent education to consider another answer, “yes, it is a permissible advantage” simply because it is from selected independent schools that model progressive/democratic and moral education, that we might paint a brilliant and delineated picture of what education for all children can be.

### CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Reflecting on this research project as I near the end, I realize that I really began this work when in a course on the Philosophy of Education, I asked my professor, “Could you be supportive of my doing a paper on the ethics of choice in schools?” At that time, I did not realize that this topic would haunt me as unfinished business for seven more years. Like seeds stored for safe keeping in a permafrost depth cave, this project has been waiting. It is finally planted in rich soil, warmed by the sun, and sprinkled with timely gentle rain.

I already knew the professor’s feelings about non-public education and they were not positive. But I have never been afraid of a challenging project, if I thought it was the right thing to do. Could I do a credible job on this topic that I also knew was highly controversial? I was a non-traditional student and this time I was in school to learn. I forged ahead with the professor’s support, trusting that she would be fair in her evaluation.

In the process of developing that paper on school choice, I found lots had been written about the philosophical and ethical issues of choosing education and how many scholarly thinkers considered non-public education in conflict with democratic ideals particularly the value of equality. I found less written from the perspective of parents who had actually sent their own children to independent schools. This gap became particularly

apparent each time I talked about independent education with people who did not have personal experience with such schools. For those who did, the issues of fairness and democracy that were both important to me were rarely a topic of conversation.

My interest in studying parents choosing independent, specifically Quaker education is connected to several longings within me. First, what does it mean to “be good” and my own process of connecting faith with daily life. I find comfort, hope and possibilities while at the same time value the respected separation of church and state when I read and hear the words that describe Quaker education.

Second, Quaker education is noted for strong academic programs that can be models for the broader educational scene.

Small size, personal and caring atmospheres, discovery learning, and nurturing the best within each student in a framework of community concern and responsibility [is] the strongest feature of Friends education. (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 44-45)

Quaker schools communicate, “a strong moral code, a desire to serve others, and a sense of responsibility . . . [They] are deliberate moral communities” (Hays, 1994, p. ix). Community worship and the practice of “speaking from silence” becomes a focal point of the community building process. Excerpts from Howard Brinton’s Quaker Education: In Theory and Practice (as cited in Kenworthy, 1987, p. 51) includes such educational priorities as “to define the meaning and goal for life” and education that prepares for “*the society not as it is, but as it ought to be*” [italics added] (p. 51). Those words shout out at me a sense of hope.

Quaker education does not seek to “convert” but rather to “influence.” . . . Quaker education does not seek to inculcate a set of beliefs or doctrines. It seeks to nurture a particular sort of personhood. Granted, the beliefs one comes to hold—and the sort of person one becomes—are not separable. (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 65)

The philosophical and ethical issues relating to the research question are discussed in Chapter II. In this chapter I discuss the methodology for this specific project and justify the use of narrative methodology to answer the question, Parents choosing independent education: Personal advantage or a moral alternative? But first, I must complete the story of who I am to place myself within the context of this project and the chosen methodology.

### **Myself as a Researcher**

In Chapter II, I have already shared some of who I am. I cannot separate myself from this project. Throughout this project I am influenced by the stories and I find it necessary to share who I am as this project emerges. That is the nature of narrative research.

H. L. Goodall, Jr. (2000) considers it an obligation for the new ethnographers to write about their own lives “in a credible, self-reflexive voice, which is to say a believable, compelling, self-examining narrator” (p. 23). The core issue is “trust.” In his teaching and writing about ethnographic techniques, Goodall (2000) asks, “Do you trust those who withhold feelings or those who share” (p. 24)? There is a delicate balance of who is being talked about, the storyteller or the story listener.

“You are what you study,” warn Sherryl Kleinman and Martha Copp (1993, p. 6) as they carefully explain that a narrative project such as this is not just an objective



choice. Truer words could not be spoken as I reflect on my personal relationship to this project. And so it is with both confession and disclosure of who I am that I share this conundrum of messages and experiences about independent education that were the field for the flowering of this project.

It was near the end of my first year as a graduate student in cultural foundations when I first saw the video, American Dream at Groton (1988). The video is the story of Johanna Vega, an Hispanic high school age girl from the South Bronx who is a scholarship student at Groton, a small independent high school known for its long history of social and academic selectivity. Jo's growing awareness of herself at Groton is revealed as she tells the stories about her loss of self. She says she is no longer Hispanic when she is with her family; her friends from home tell her that she is "white." At Groton, Jo says that she is "not white." There she is Hispanic both in the eyes of her classmates and in her soul. As Jo exhibits her artwork at Groton her white classmates deny the reality or *truth* of how her world looks, feels, and works (Vega, 1992). At the end of the video, the graduation scene shows Jo receiving an award for her contributions in cultural expression and art. Her mother expresses gratitude for what she considers to be a wonderful opportunity. Writing later about her Groton experience, Vega (1992) describes it as an opportunity to "express my own cultural background" as well as "cultural warfare," and "sacrifice" (p. 256).

When I first saw the video of Jo's story I had tears in my eyes. I, like Jo's mother, saw an education for which gratitude was expressed. Perhaps it is my memory of pouring over college catalogues for places where Groton students will go to college knowing that

was not an option for me. Though her days at Groton were clearly painful for Jo, a “wonderful opportunity” was what I saw and heard.

That was not the response of my classmates, mostly professional educators and parents, many of whom were people of color. Instead I heard multiple and competing interpretations of the movie we had just seen. The room felt charged with electrical currents of emotion that I had not anticipated.

African American mothers expressed outrage.

“I would never do that to my child,” a school principal/mother said with certainty. She explained to the class that her child had begged to go to a historically Black university after attending integrated schools through high school.

A white classmate broadened the conversation by asking, “What’s wrong with being average?” She often told stories in class of her own children’s school experiences that from my perspective reflected neither a passion for engaged learning nor academic achievement as priorities.

I was stunned by my classmates’ responses to Jo’s story and the impact of seeing a video about an elite independent school. For many in the class, that kind of school was unknown until they saw the video. It had never occurred to me that Jo’s experience at Groton, one of the sixteen most elite independent schools in the United States (Cooksen & Persell, 1985, p. 43) would be viewed with such hostility. Watching American Dream at Groton for the first time, I did not see the clash of personal ambition and moral values in an environment where advantage was expected and permissible even though some of Groton’s students, graduates and faculty used words to describe a Groton education as

affirming a moral responsibility for public service and leadership. I had seen and heard Jo Vega's story with my own filters "shaping and refining the context and tones" (Cottle, 2002, p. 535). My initial impulse was to "push" my story "against the stories of others and in a sense demand that others rethink their stories in light of [my] own stories (Cottle, 2002, p. 536).

My own story of "choosing" to send a child to an independent school that could provide an exceptional education had been so different until that day. Later reading Widdershoven's words (1993), I understood better what I had experienced in class that day.

We live our lives according to a script, which secures that our actions are part of a meaningful totality. Our actions are organized in such a way that we can give an account of them, justify them by telling an intelligible story about them. . . . We also, *in telling these stories, change the meaning of our experiences and actions.* (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 7)

In an attempt, perhaps to justify or at least better understand the long-term consequences of Jo's experience at Groton, I wrote Pearl Rock Kane, Director of the Klingenstein Program at Teacher's College, Columbia University. Her book, Independent Schools, Independent Thinkers (1991a) includes a chapter by Johanna Vega and the introductory summary of contributing authors says she is a graduate of Columbia University. "Did she know what had happened to Jo Vega," I asked? "No," she responded saying that she had lost track of her.

Though I have never met Jo Vega, her story is an important story about independent education that is intertwined with mine. Once in a while I still look for Jo

Vega searching the Internet using a variety of word combinations. There are on-line pieces about her and the Groton video, but that is all that I have found. Her story compels me to keep looking. That is the impact of stories as research.

I am the youngest of three in a family that might be described by some as “over educated.” Schooling and “being educated” was clearly communicated to be a high priority. My mother, born in 1907, earned a master’s degree in Home Management and taught at a major eastern university before she married my father, an international student who completed a Ph.D. in genetics but had a life-long dream of being a farmer. My family lived in Denmark from 1937 until 1949. At the end of World War II there was a major recruitment of English speaking Europeans with advanced degrees encouraging people like my Dad to come to the United States to teach the influx of students coming to college on the GI Bill. My father finally did become a “farmer”—a fancy farmer, I used to say, because he became a professor in the Dairy Department of the University. We moved to Lincoln, Nebraska and lived in a blue-collar neighborhood sprinkled with a few academic families like ours. Fathers of my best friends delivered the milk, ran the YMCA, installed and fixed the electricity, laid brick and did beautiful finish carpentry work in modest homes built in my neighborhood. Family dinners were lively discussions of current events with a definite lean to the political left largely influenced by my Danish father’s belief in democracy *and* strong social systems to care for the vulnerable. Dad, always interested in what we had to say and how we had come to our points of view, encouraged curiosity and the courage to ask questions.

Mother's description of another's worth – particularly the lack of it - was often supplemented with the phrase, "s/he is totally uneducated." Formal schooling was not the total measure of another's worth—but it is my clear recollection that education and the apparent use of it did save folks from such an indictment. But interestingly, report card day was always celebrated with a special cake for dessert with a single lighted candle in the middle. "For all the good grades," Mother would always announce. Nothing was ever said, at least in that family setting, about grades that might not have been considered "good."

In my childhood days most of my friends' mothers worked at home, baking, cooking, cleaning, sewing, teaching Sunday school and leading activities for children. A part of me wanted that kind of mother too. Instead my mother sent my father to PTA to deal with teachers, other mothers, help with the 4-H club, and chaperone the Pep Club. A very kind man, Dad was both good at and patient with this role. Mother focused her community efforts on projects like initiating foreign language study in our elementary school and persuading the public powers to build the first community swimming pool in our working class neighborhood. It was only when I was fully adult that I realized that I had been raised by a mother who was generations ahead of her day and from whom I had learned important lessons about being a responsible person. Feminism was not a word I heard until I was a college student reading The Feminine Mystique (Friedan, 1963), but I know now that I was raised by parents who clearly understood and modeled the value of gender equality.

My parents were teachers at heart and our daily lives reflected their interest in teaching and boundless opportunities for experiential learning. Mathematics and charity were taught with our weekly one-dollar allowance carefully counted out in dimes. Ten percent for church, ten percent for saving was easy to learn and practice under Mother's carefully thought out system. Anatomy and physiology were likely subjects as she cut up the chicken raised in the backyard, that she had captured, killed, and cleaned for dinner. The process would include lessons teaching us to distinguish the valves, chambers, arteries and veins of the heart and explaining the mechanics of a chicken's gizzard before it was all sliced and diced for dinner.

Dad taught basic ethics always modeling what it was to be a good person. His gently spoken advice when dealing with ethical questions was always, "You do what you have to do and *you do the right thing*." He always assumed that we would and most generally we did. Though not particularly religious, he seemed to inherently know and believe in the Quaker belief of inner goodness.

Dad readily talked politics from the perspective of what was for the common good rather than a personal privilege. He knew how things grew and could repair most household items, and always had a warm laugh. In the summers we raised and showed dairy calves and worked on 4-H sewing projects that were carefully planned to stretch our monthly "clothing allowances." In the process my brother, sister and I all learned basic life skills that have served us well.

Mother was instrumental in developing programs in the public schools for high school age students who in those days were called "educable mentally retarded." Given

her strong emphasis on higher education, we marveled at her patience and support of her students. Though she was a tough taskmaster of her own children, it was always with gentle care that she dealt with and talked about her own students.

I majored in child development both as an undergraduate and graduate student. Given my background, that should not be surprising though as I have said earlier, my high school teachers were horrified. “Domestiphobia” as Jane Roland Martin (1992) calls it, was alive and well in the early 1960’s though fortunately not in the home of my youth. As an undergraduate I was intrigued with Maria Montessori before she became fashionable again. The creation of Head Start coincided with my graduation from college. Those of us who were graduating Child Development majors had the opportunity to be site directors in one of the national Head Start pilot projects the first summer of funding. This provided me with opportunities to put into action some of Montessori’s wise ideas about the education of children whose parents were poor.

My vision of schooling for young children was a combination of what I had yearned for and the best of what I had experienced as a child. I likened the education of children to a flower that blooms because it is planted at the right time and depth, nurtured with warm sun, gentle rains, and if necessary carefully staked or caged in order that all the branches with the multitude of blossoms receive support and grow in proliferation and beauty.

Like zinnias that generally grow in abundance with common soil, some neglect, and a small bit of vigilance I had originally imagined and espoused the ideal that all children could, should and would make it and flower in the “common school.” Therefore,

my very act of choosing education for my own children shifts my experience from common or ordinary.

### **Narrative Methodology and this Project**

I believe that there is general misunderstanding about independent education. As a form of education it is “private” in the sense that this world belongs to those who are within it. The public perceptions and conversations about this world therefore does not include the moral deliberations that I believe parents do consider when making this form of school choice. Narrative research by its very nature permits the marginalized, the silenced voices of the community [however broadly defined] to be acknowledged and heard, often to “undermine the overpowering influence” of dominant voices of a society. (Casey, 1993, p. 3). “To study personal narrative is to value the mundane, everyday, *private*, informal, and often conversational use of language by diverse and ordinary people” [italics added] (Langellier, 1989, p. 272).

Every narrative is highly constructed text structured by a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion omission, and disparity. The principal value of narrative is that its information comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representations of reality. (Popular Memory Group, as cited in Casey, 1996, p. 234)

Arthur Bochner (1997) describes narrative research as a “wilderness of lived experience” when compared with the “tame” world of academia. Narrative methodology forces researchers to come face to face with the human condition and the “ordinary” man (para. 14).



The sad truth is that the academic self frequently is cut off from the ordinary, experiential self. A life of theory can remove one from experience, make one feel unconnected. All of us inhabit multiple worlds. When we live in the world of theory, we usually assume that we are inhabiting an objective world. There, in the objective world, we are expected to play the role of spectator.

It is a hard world for a human being to feel comfortable in, so we try to get rid of the distinctively human characteristics that distort the mythological beauty of objectivity. . . . In the *objective world*, the goal is to speak nature's language without the intrusions of human *subjectivity*. . . .

Some empiricists may still see social engineering as a moral exemplar of the best that rationality and method can offer, but *most of us recognize that the haunting question of how to live a good and ethical life can not be circumscribed by appeals to hard facts and objective methods*. [Italics added] (Bochner, 1997, para. 19, 22)

Bochner's concerns address three issues that are important in this study of independent education. First, theory, while valuable, may be disconnected from real life as it is lived with conflicting and competing values and roles such as I have already experienced and is expressed by parents when they talk about education for their children. Second, real life includes the heart and soul that makes us who we really are in the fullest sense, which cannot be felt with numbers, trends or graphs. Parents' concerns about children's needs can be expressed in words that capture feelings and emotions that influence such decisions. Third, as I have been reminded on numerous occasions since embarking on this project, "school choice" and the very idea of independent, non-public school, more often than not, is discussed from a political perspective and rarely talked about from the language of the "ethical" and the "aesthetic" (Huebner, 1975).

Therefore, story telling becomes a means "to put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition, if only temporarily" (Casey, 1996, p.

216). Narrative is a “way of knowing carved out of experience, experience as it is inflected by particular cultural, geopolitical, and material circumstances” (Langellier, 1999, p. 136-37).

It is in this context that I argue that narrative methodology is particularly well suited for me and for this project. Narrative research is about stories, mine as well as those of others, and it allows a richer context from which to develop insights and understanding. Narrative researchers, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (1993) describe their encounter with narrative research:

Holism, richness of data and a sense that we were grappling with all that was missing in more distant, variable-based research. . . . Listening to people talk in their own terms about what had been significant in their lives seemed to us far more valuable than studying preconceived psychometric scales or contrived experiments (p. ix).

Narrative stories can tell us about life, shape personal identity, “tell us who we are” (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 6), give us new awareness, and contribute to making sense out of lived experiences (Widdershoven 1993), our own as well as those of “The Other” (Cottel, 2002). “Story stresses the personal . . . The many layers of truth, the hazy line between data and interpretation” (Josselson & Lieblich 1993, p. xi). Narrative stories tell “not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 19).

Researching independent education benefits from the use of narrative research methodology because the researcher can discover unanticipated themes and patterns, multiple and competing beliefs, as well as consistencies and conflicts as told through

parents' stories. This can lead to broader and more insightful questions, possible answers, and greater understanding about participation in independent education. At the very least, these narratives will provide an "encounter" whereby we might be "stirred by another's words and possibly enlightened by them as well" (Cottle, 2002, p. 536).

Narrative research uncovers what is unheard or silenced. As a methodology it offers a perspective that differs from the extensive writing about the issue of "school choice" that allude to faceless masses but often leave out of the conversation the stories of lived experiences of real parents and their children

But narrative research is messy work and it is not without critics who question its contributions to knowledge. Even some of the participants in this study questioned what I was doing, and how their story would contribute to research. Described by Clifford Geertz (as cited in Langellier, 1989, p. 24) as a "blurred genre," Kristin Langellier (1989) calls it a "boundary phenomena" because as a methodology it is situated between a number of traditional categorical pairs:

Between literary and social discourse, between written and oral modes of communication between public and private spheres of interaction, between ritual performance and incidental conversation, between fact and fiction. . . . While rich and diverse personal narrative research is at the same time confusing and sometimes conflicting. (p. 244)

Narrative research is grounded in the practices of telling and listening to the life stories of those who have been *selected because of particular characteristics*; transcribing of text, identification of themes and patterns; careful interpretation by the researcher who also places him or herself in the context of the study, and subsequent

reading by others. In this case the characteristic is parents who have made an intentional choice for a specific type of education, Quaker education.

Kellett and Dalton (2001) in their book on conflict negotiation describe the role of narrative as not necessarily just to know how to do something different, but to increase “understanding of the underlying cultural and systemic tensions” (p. vii).

### *Language and Community*

Independent education has its own language (Hays, 1994; Kane, 1991a; Peshkin, 2001). All educators do not share this language. A commonality of language by those who have experienced independent education may be in contrast to the language of those who are on the outside of this experience who observe and interpret this phenomenon with another voice. Within a particular independent school community, there may be multiple speech communities. Likewise, when comparing different independent schools, there are multiple voices. I was not surprised to read David Purpel’s (1998) description of Sacred Heart Schools, “informed by a spirit that seeks justice, love, and community” (p. 215) or Allan Peshkin’s (2001) description of “Edgewood Academy.” He describes that school in language that overflows with superlatives of academic excellence and achievement. I have met and talked with representatives of both schools at conferences prior to my knowing either Purpel or Peshkin and their choices of words to describe these noted independent schools ring true to my experience.

There are three distinct but related functions of language, all are essential for interpretation: (a) “content in terms of the speaker’s experience and that of the speech community” (Holiday, as cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 21); (b) “the interpersonal function”

which addresses the relationship between the story teller and the listener; and (c) the structure of how something is said (Riessman, 1993, p. 21). Although there are varying positions on analysis, Riessman (1993) prefers text analysis modeled after the Personal Narratives Group which sees “context [as] multilayered, involving the historical moment of the telling, the race, class, and gender systems that narrators manipulate to survive and with which their talk as to be interpreted” (p. 21). Given the nature of this project, a study of independent education as possibly a “moral” alternative, the context of these stories is extremely important.

Narrative research assumes that the understanding of language, in its varying forms has multiple meanings reflecting multiple “verbal ideological and social belief systems” (Bakhtin, as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 21). Those multiple meanings can define stratification of society and illuminate our understanding of social life (Casey, 1993).

Language, according to Bahktin, is expressed as “a product of the whole complex social situation” constructing what Fish describes as an “interpretive community” (as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 26). While a Quaker school may be considered in a broad sense an “interpretive community” connected by a common language, it would be erroneous to assume that all parents who make such an educational choice, are a singular voice. Instead, my anticipation is that within this larger “community” there will be multiple, and perhaps competing voices of what this experience is and why it has been selected.

There will be “Quaker voices” and there will be other voices reflecting the “pattern of their own priorities” (Casey, 1993, p. 19) that may form additional interpretive communities within this larger context. My preliminary interaction with the

school suggested that those interpretive communities would include language about education as “responsive to a child or family’s needs.” I was concerned that I would find language reflecting a desire for personal advantage, as found in Brantlinger’s (2003) research on public school mothers.

Narrative research assumes that the interpretation and understanding of language including metaphors and vocabulary, in its varying forms has multiple meanings reflecting multiple “verbal ideological and social belief systems” (Bakhtin, as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 21). People closely associated with the school when talking about the school being a good match for a particular child commonly use the phrase; “S/he needs to be here.” But “needs” has a variety of meanings sometimes sending confusing messages as it is spoken and as it is understood to convey what a Friends school is all about. For certain, multiple meanings can define stratification of society and illuminate our understanding of social life (Casey, 1993, p. 21).

While Quaker Schools have common themes and shared values as expressed through language, it should not be assumed that all who choose Quaker education use a similar language thereby creating a concise “interpretive community” (Casey, 1993, p. 20). “[I]t is difficult to create and expand the Quaker ethos in Friends Schools’ communities when so few Quaker students and families are involved” (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 44).

Key “passwords” (Casey, 1993, p. 26) that describe and connect this interpretive community and describe Quaker education are found in written documents and to a varying extent in verbal communication. These words include *community*, which means a

sense of belonging to the Quaker community. “*Peace*” and “*non-violence*” (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 52; Friends Council on Education) are emphasized in conversation about discipline and behavior toward others. An “*inward* sense of rightness” (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 52) or acknowledgement of “*inner light*” “*goodness within*” or the more formal words, “*There is that of God within*” (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 55) permeate written documents and conversation that deals with respect and sacredness of the other and the awareness of the presence of God. “*Equality*” of gender, race, and social class; and *simplicity* in dress, speech and deportment, *integrity* (Kenworthy, 1987, p. 52), *justice and dialogue* through *consensus decision making* dominate literature, songs, art, instructional themes and the intentional shaping of a shared moral culture.

The very act of selecting participants, who was included and who was not, influenced the range of stories that were shared and hence what perspectives that I heard. “We must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth’ which is itself a representation” (Reissman, 1993, p. 16).

By its nature, narrative is “an act of self-presentation” (Goffman, as cited in Langellier, 1989, p. 247) influenced also by the interviewer, me. The very process of requesting parent participants for this proposed project was framed with an introductory letter from the Heads of the School saying that I was a long-time friend of the school. Yet I was prepared for “self-aggrandizing postures” and other social positioning functions that became part of the story telling process (Langellier, 1989, p. 248) and the “masks” through which I would catch a glimpse of people as they are (Casey, 1996, p. 218).

“Story telling,” as Reissman (1993) points out, “is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us” (p. 1). But it should always be remembered that the storyteller is the *expert* on their life. “Participants are the teachers, we [the researchers] are their students” (Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 29).

Narrative research does not presume “objectivity” or neutrality of the researcher. Instead it acknowledges the intimate relationship of the subject under study with those who are involved in the project.

In any research there is the investigator and the investigated. We (narrative researchers) find them harder to separate. Narrative research does not purport to be either rational or objective. Rather, narrative offers a divergent rationality. What makes narrative believable is the sense of reality they create, their intimacy, economy, accessibility, verisimilitude, and their capacity to evoke and provoke identification, feeling, empathy, and dialogue. (Bochner & Ellis, 1999)

Josselson describes feelings of guilt about the very process of writing about her participants and I relate to her concerns.

Where in the interview I had been responsive to them, now I am using their lives in the service of something else, for my own purposes, to show something to others. I am guilty about being an intruder and the, to some extent, a betrayer. (Josselson, 1996, p. 70).

### ***Beginning the Research***

As I work on this project I feel a sense of conflict, which I now realize is a fear of possible betrayal or “offending the host” (Richardson, 1997, p. 157). When I began this project I felt torn between my initial hopes for what I longed these stories to be and what in reality I might find. Now I am in awe of the important truths shared by these experts



on children's lives, but I, like Josselson (1996) also feel a hesitation about sharing this work. She addresses her anxiety this way:

It is with our anxiety, dread, guilt and shame that we honor our participants. To do this work, we must contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress or rationalize them. We must at least try to be fully aware of what we are doing. (Josselson, 1996, p. 70)

Such is definitely my case of this research project. I selected a research site where I served as a member of the Board of Trustees years before I ever considered this research project. Two years after collecting the narratives I was offered a position at the school. Though none of the participants were close personal friends at the time that they shared their stories, I did know some from before the project and I became better acquainted with others during my two years working at the school. Some parents have asked me about the project; others seem to be oblivious that they ever met me before. In those cases I never mentioned their participation. Only once, when a parent seemed concerned not remembering where we had met before, I said, "you were a participant in my research project on parents choosing independent school." When other participants asked about the project, I was enthusiastic, unspecific, and focused on the background theory as a rationale for doing it rather than sharing details of the actual project. But my closeness to this project and the participants is not without concern.

*Assembling the subjects.* When I decided to study parents who had chosen to send their children to a Friends School, I requested assistance from the Quaker school I knew best, the one located in my community, where I knew the leadership fairly well. It was a simple request. I explained my interest in researching parents who had chosen

independent education because I was interested in exploring this as a moral alternative, which acknowledges democratic values. Would they help me secure participants?

Quickly the Heads of the school agreed to support the project and offered to send a letter home with enrolled students indicating that I was a “Friend of the School” and a graduate student at the local university. Their letter incorporated in the weekly newsletter accompanied a form that briefly explained the project and space for their response if they were interested. Attached was a stamped envelope addressed to me (see Appendix B).

Soon I started to receive positive responses to my request for subjects. I anticipated perhaps a dozen responses and actually hoped for fewer. Instead over two dozen responded to my request. In consultation with my trusted advisor the decision was made to try to interview everyone who had indicated a willingness to participate. I immediately started making follow up calls and scheduling interviews. For the most part people were delighted to be part of the study. Some expressed curiosity about why I had selected the school and asked what other people said.

Over a period of three months I met with parents, ultimately collecting stories from nineteen that were interested in participating. I met some parents in their homes, some I met at their place of work, one requested meeting me at my home and several wanted to tell me their stories at the school. Their participation became obvious to others as they told their stories on the playground or in the school’s library, but apparently anonymity did not matter to them. Early in the process I became aware that parents talked with each other about being in the study. They seemed to share freely with others what they learned from others about this project. Some told me what they had learned about

me and the project from those interviewed before them. To say that the school is a tightly bound community would be to underestimate of the degree of connectedness that I discovered in the process of collecting these stories.

I began each session by thanking the parent for their participation and asking them if they had any questions before they began to talk. A number of people asked about story telling as a research method, and I found myself wanting to explain the methodology and yet wanting to not say too much because it would influence what they might say. I generally said,

Narrative research, the process of listening to people tell stories that share a similarity, like parents who have selected a Friends school for their children. It is a way of finding out what is important to a specific identified group, in this case parents. If I were to have made up a list of questions to ask you, I might not include what is really important to you. What you tell me, becomes what is important for this research project.

For most that was a satisfactory answer about what I was doing and why I was interested in their story. The initial letter-soliciting participants said I would interview each person twice. The second interview became unnecessary since I had far more participants than originally anticipated and most talked extensively about themselves as well as their child.

Interviews lasted from less than fifteen minutes to longer than two hours. For some I felt it might have been the first time that someone listened to them talk about their child's life. Some said, "I could talk about my child forever" and in a number of cases I believe that is true. Because I had some experience with Friends communities as a non-Quaker, I assumed that there would be multiple ways of talking about a Friends school

experience. There were. Some used Quaker language and others talked about similar ideas but with the use of secular language.

It was easy for me to feel closeness to the participants. I had also been a Friends school parent but at another school. People asked me about my children. Where had my children gone to school and where they had gone to college? My Quaker school experiences seemed important to many. Why had I chosen Quaker Schools? Why this one? A mother wearing a Nebraska sweatshirt found an instant soul mate when I mentioned that I too had lived in Nebraska. Her candid story reflected a sense of safety in telling me, a fellow Cornhusker, how she *really* felt about her children's experiences in the local public schools. Talking with a couple of mothers that I had met years earlier was like old friends catching up on kids and family. Some parents thanked me for the opportunity to tell the story of their child's life because they were proud of their child. Often it was pride in achievements that would not be measured by academic superlatives but instead by measures of goodness, kindness and courage. Some were proud of their children just simply because they were their children and they obviously adored them just as they were with no expectations of what they might need to be. Others, I think were relieved that someone would listen with accepting patience to their story of how hard it had been to parent a particular child.

***Making sense out of stories.*** I had initially thought that I could type a sketchy outline as I listened to the tapes, and then I would be able to go back and fill in the exact language, pauses, exclamations, and self-corrections that were part of the stories. I am a fast typist, but as I began the interview process returning home after each one to madly

start typing, I realized that I could not keep up with the transcriptions and hired someone to do this initial typing for me. Perhaps it was very fortunate that my typist was fast, but not very accurate. I say fortunate, because this forced me to go carefully back over the typed transcriptions before I began the real work of analysis. Headphones on my ears, my foot tapping the play button of the tape recorder's foot control I learned that I could set it with an automatic rewind that I adjusted for the speech pattern of the speaker. With the tape recorder whirling back and forth almost with a rhythm of its own, I spent at least the next four months, perhaps it was longer, listening to tapes, adding minutia to the typed transcripts, and adding my hand written notes that I had quickly written after each of the narrative sessions.

The depth and richness of the stories amazed even me though I had heard every story originally. The stories have warmth of relationship so evident in the telling process. People who had been total strangers until we met, talked candidly about marriage, pregnancies anticipated and not, deliveries that were easy and difficult, previous lovers, divorce, experiencing the brink of bankruptcy, as well as intimate details about the story of their child's life. To just analyze their words would not be enough. My sense of how the words were said, the context, the softness, the nervous laughs as well as the good humored belly laughs were all part of the story that I knew I would have to capture for retelling but only through the use of words – mine along with theirs.

Quakers have a core religious belief; “there is that of God within everyone.” I had learned about this belief in my earlier days of teaching at a Quaker college. That belief sustained me through twelve years of leading Girl Scouts, two rounds with the Cub

Scouts, and teaching many college students some of who are ill prepared, make poor judgments, or are just plain naughty without even a twinkle in their eyes. It is a belief that makes it easier to smile, forgive and tolerate others. It is also a religious belief that impacts on the charity with which I heard and retell these stories. It is easier to thoughtfully reflect on conflicted stories, which I believe are not uncommon in such a research process, when one remembers, “There is that of God” within this person too. How can you not like and as the Quakers would say, “honor” someone that is caring enough to participate in such a research process, exposing himself or herself to the possible critique of someone else?

The research protocol was supposed to be to ask the participant, “Tell me the story of your child’s life.” Then I was supposed to be silent until they stopped talking. This is the methodology described by Kathleen Casey (1993). My subjects did not know that they were not supposed to ask me questions in the middle of their stories. Sometimes what they said made my curious and impulsive nature become uncontrolled and I would ask them questions, too. The texts include my intrusions and the analysis of these stories tries to be truthful about my breaking protocol. The theory is that participants will have “selectivities and silences” (Casey, 1993, p. 17) that contribute to the overall analysis. My participants did have selectivities and silences, but not as cleanly encountered as described by Casey.

When I began the analysis process I made an expansive chart on a spreadsheet. Down the left hand side I made text classifications of what parents talked about grouping together similar ideas that covered what I thought was the breadth of their stories. Across

the top of the sheet I had the initials of the participants. Reading the transcripts I would place an “X” in each cell where the topic and the person’s initials intersected. I found myself adding more topics to the already long left-hand column. It was a useful exercise to get me started in the process of collecting themes and patterns. By the time I finished this massive chart, I had sheets of papers that I had taped together to proudly show my advisor. It was like a pattern for an enormous and intricate piece of Danish cross-stitch like the projects my father’s sisters stitched as gifts for major celebrations. But without a color code to the yarns that would stitch the groups of X’s together, it was still not a clear picture what this would become. However, at last I did have a sense of direction on how to begin to fill in the shades, hues, and outlines that would become the final picture.

I divided the copies of the transcripts into three neat piles, reflecting the topics that I believed parents talked about: (a) children and family’s needs, (b) certain conditions of schooling where parents described their children as happy, and (c) Quaker priorities. Then I divided the piles again because it was apparent that while lots of parents used the word “needs” they were talking about different patterns of priorities. I then began the process of writing about what parents talked about. By then it was the spring of 2004 and I knew that I had more research and writing to do to support this research project. The stacks of typed transcripts are still stored carefully in those piles at the side of my desk as a constant reminder of the words that were shared so generously.

As I read more, listened to the tapes again, wrote, and contemplated, my thoughts evolved. Then I had the opportunity to work at the school that was the source of my stories. The importance of studying Friends education as a “moral alternative” seemed

even more compelling once I was in that setting. Though I had known it before, I was struck by the parallel between democratic ideals and the expression of Friends' testimonies for peace, equality, simplicity, community and integrity. Working at the school I was surrounded by conscious reflection and practice of those priorities and I understood better what parents had talked about when they told me their stories. Even before I completed this research project, I began to make changes the school's major external publication in order that it reflect more strongly Friends testimonies and the role of a Friends school in teaching a moral education. The fourth issue was recognized by a Quaker leadership organization as an exceptional example of a school newsletter describing what Friends education is. I believe that I was able to do that only because parents had taught me what was important to them, a school that is a "moral alternative."

While the initial themes that emerged in this study are important, the issue of moral education, specifically the importance of children learning what Amy Gutmann (1987) calls the "morality of association" (p. 62) became the most critical message learned from listening to parents as they talk about their children. Such a topic could not possibly be superceded in importance for schools to teach today. But without these parents' stories, I seriously doubt that I could have asked questions to elicit and shape this priority. Only because I asked, "Tell me the story of your child's life," did I discover their important messages.

The words of Arthur Bochner (1997) summarize my hopes for this project:

In our work (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 1996) we try to produce texts that show how people breach canonical conventions and expectations; how they cope with exceptional, difficult, and transformative crises; how they invent new ways of



speaking when old ways fail them; and how they turn calamities into gifts. These stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). They long to be used rather than analyzed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled. And they promise the companionship of intimate detail as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts, touching readers where they live and offering details that linger in the mind. (para. 66)

*Truth* is not really the issue in this narrative project. Instead, there are three questions we must be willing to ask when confronted with the stories of other's lives in this case parents who have selected a Quaker, independent education for their children. "What *if* these stories are true?" If they are, we must then ask, "what does this mean? And then we must ask, "what are we called to do?" It is the last question that compels me to explore and share these stories of parents choosing independent education for their children.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS—MEETING NEEDS

I do not believe that the theoretical and ethical issues discussed in Chapter II about independent education and democratic values can be separated from the actual voices of parents who are living the American educational experience. There are at least three themes that emerge when listening to parents talk about their children and education. These themes illustrate the complexity of competing beliefs and values about education and the multiple and conflicting issues that are important to parents.

I originally thought that I would find distinct themes and that I could cleanly separate the stories that mothers told. Parents talk about *needs*. They describe *certain conditions* at school that they clearly identify as happy or unhappy, acceptable or unacceptable. Some parents talk about their children and schooling using language that expresses values consistent with *Quaker beliefs*. Though most stories were aligned with one of these three themes, there are strands of multiple themes reflected in some stories raising conflicted messages about how parents make sense their children's needs as well as their own. To organize the nature of these three broad themes, I gave them titles (a) Meeting Needs, discussed in this chapter, (b) Under Certain Conditions, discussed in Chapter V, and (c) Some People are Really Quaker, Some Just Don't Know It, discussed in Chapter VI.

Stories of meeting needs fall into four categories. Some parents in this study talk a lot about their children's needs. "Nate needs" or "Nate doesn't need," or "Lee just needs . . ." I address these stories in the section called "Fixing Children and Academic Success." These needs can be perceptions of a child's personality, specific conditions of learning or differences that have been diagnosed by professionals, prescribed "meds" as one parent referred to frequently, interventions through therapies, and remedial or extensive supplemental tutoring services. These interventions are generally for the purpose of changing something about the child, to enhance academic performance, social skills, or readiness to learn at school and generally are associated with *quantifiable measurements of the child and academic success*.

A second story of need is based on the parent's perception of the nature of their child in the context of expressed beliefs about other people's children. While there were glimpses of this pattern in several stories, one in particular stands out noted by the casual freedom with which this story is told. I call this story, "Mother Needs or the Conflicted Mother" because there is a pattern of inconsistent and conflicting expressed beliefs and rationale for the choice of education. This story most replicates the findings of Ellen Brantlinger (2003) on middle class educated mothers.

Two other groups of stories fall within "needs" stories, but unlike the first groups where academic success is the reining priority, these last two groups of stories are about how people relate to one another. One group of stories is defined by experiences with injustice and fears for the child because the family is different from the dominant culture. Differences include race, gender orientation, and family composition. These stories focus

on the qualitative nature of schooling and the priority of *seeking a community of fairness* and safe inclusion in all aspects of school life. Quantitative measures of success while mentioned, do not dominate these stories and academic achievements do not define the child.

A fourth area of “needs” is stories that tell about relationships at school, family needs and school as a partnership with parents. These parents talk from a professional basis, which identifies what is developmentally appropriate for children today given the reality of mothers having careers away from home. School as an extension of what home is or can be is the dominant theme.

### **Fixing Children for Academic Success**

From a parent’s perspective their child’s needs are real. As the researcher, I might have questioned the rationality of some of these needs but the point of this project was to hear parents’ stories as told and accept them as *their truth*. When a parent describes a child has having a need, it might be a story with several examples of their child having a professionally identified difference or “disability” as in not able to do something when compared with some standard or norm that is either described or implied, or for which a therapy is considered or implemented.

These stories included pregnancy or birth traumas, developmental delays or differences defined by professional evaluation and acknowledged by the parent. Some need stories included reference to a child’s personality characteristic described as different from an articulated norm that is by implication, not different, i.e., something

considered to be normal attributed to other children by whoever or whatever determines what normal might be. Testing and evaluations are part of the cycle of these stories.

Needs to be remedied or accommodated included shyness or an introverted nature, physical differences, difficulties in a specific academic area, as well as a host of descriptions that could broadly be defined as learning or behaving differently. Parents described these differences as needing to be accepted, understood, accommodated, fixed, or all of these options. Broadly, parents describe these needs as having an impact or potential impact on a child's ability to demonstrate success in school learning based on some quantitative testing standards.

These stories are dominated by the child's identified needs and the mother's role in meeting those needs with diagnosis, intervention, therapy, and medications. The stories are about how we—that is, the mother and child—meet the identified challenges. I did not hear accepting phrases like, “that's how he or she is.” Listening to this group of stories, I felt as though fixing, as in changing the child to eliminate or minimize the need, was the major focus of these stories.

Education to fix children is not a concept unique to this project. Proposing an alternative, Mel Levine (Brosnan, 2005, Levine, 2002) has focused his career on the developing child and the educational philosophy of *identifying a child's strengths* to maximize a child's potential for success at school and in life. This approach is very different from the deficiency model of describing a particular child in the context of norms for specific ages or groups of children as currently being applied through extensive testing programs associated with the “No Child Left Behind” (Shaw, 2001). The

deficiency model defines a child by what he or she can not do that must be remedied. The strengths model defines a child by what he or she can do.

I found that the deficiency model of defining a child is packaged with the “good mother” a role that in these stories overshadows the mother’s former identity. It is the good mother who seeks solutions and remediation to alleviate the “deficiency” of her child and the mother’s success or failure is expressed in terms of the child’s progress and change in whatever area is being “fixed.” It is as though being a “good mother” is based on how fixed the child becomes and academic achievement is the means of quantifying good mothering.

Friends schools base their educational philosophy and practices on Quaker testimonies or statements of priority values that include peace, equality, simplicity, and beliefs that there is “that of God” within each individual (Smith, 2002) and that the search for truth is a “continuing revelation” (Smith, 2002, p. 139). Because of Quaker beliefs, Friends Schools have a wide tolerance for individual differences. The testimony of “equality” is far reaching. Equality ranges from gender and sexual orientation equality, to equality among young, middle and older students, as well as a curriculum that emphasizes education of the whole child and for example makes the arts equal in importance to traditional academics (Goldstein & Tomlin, 2006).

Levine (2002) describes schools that are responsive to students’ needs as schools that “tolerate, educate and celebrate all kinds of minds” (p. 307). Because of the Quaker belief of “that of God” or “inner goodness” within everyone and Friends testimonies, particularly equality, a Friends school can be attractive for children and families where

there is a real or perceived difference from a dominant norm. “Honoring individual gifts” is not only a slogan but is reflected in educational practices.

A Friends School hopes to offer a community that cares deeply about what kind of persons its members, young and old are becoming, what goals and motives are effective in their lives, what their response is to the high calling of being human. They hope to be communities of those who have, not only techniques and knowledge but also a vivid relationship to reality, a hunger for worship, a passion for truth, and the experience of growth in the Light. (New Garden Friends School, 2006, para. 1)

***Leah’s Story: “That’s Why We Did It”***

Leah describes her first child as “outgoing, good natured, most of the time” as she begins her response to my inquiry, “tell me the story of your child’s life.” Early in her story she tells me that she was working full time before her child was born, but then she quickly interjects, “But I’ve done some things” and explains, “I stayed home with them from the beginning.” It is as though parenting is not “doing” something of value, and being a stay at home mother is important to convey to me.

Her rapid fire story telling is marked by short, clipped sentences for the interview that extends over 90 minutes. “I can’t think of anything remarkable that would be of interest, I think he had a normal you know toddlerhood. . . . He took long naps every afternoon. He had a good schedule,” she says introducing Nate to me.

The child that she had just described as “outgoing, good natured” a few sentences earlier is then described as a preschooler

He’d just kind of barrel through it [a game that other children were playing] followed by, “you know.” And he was real active; I had trouble actually. . . . I

couldn't go places with both of them; I couldn't manage two of them out in public. . . . I wouldn't even think of taking them to the grocery store.

Suddenly I am introduced to a second child but it is Nate's story that is the main agenda of our meeting.

"I started reading about attention deficit disorder" and she describes being upset reading about behaviors that she had observed in Nate. "You know he was always real impulsive," she pauses, "you know real sweet and everything but we just had a hard time."

Even in these early segments of her story, Leah's reports are conflicting. She intersperses "sweet" with an acknowledgement that she was having a difficult time parenting her child. She talks about observing behaviors that would become a major concern and challenge to change and she acknowledges not knowing what to do. "To me it was like really obvious, and I'm not really trained in that area."

Leah then embarks on the major pattern of her story, a succession of diagnoses and therapies, and her daily work with Nate, whose life is described as a joint project. "Every single day, practically we did something." The story is marked by the sequence of deficiencies identified and interventions and implemented therapies. Leah's story continues with each developmental stage marked by identification of differences, therapies, and her own disappointments. "I was sitting there crying," she said, when advised that her child would benefit from medication for hyperactivity.

Despite all this work that had been done, despite he'd had . . . tutoring, occupational therapy, I'd work with him daily for several years. . . .



So we did that, we started him [on medications for hyperactivity] . . . It was pretty obvious that he did a lot better. The whole dynamic in the house changed cause he's not jumping on the couch.

Her story then repeats earlier versions of the sequence of evaluation, the role of insurance to pay for therapy and now the addition of medications. Finally Leah expands her story to include her second child. Leah describes Zoe's evaluation and intervention process.

So this time doing the whole insurance thing again talking to people, we ended up taking her to [a major medical research center] . . . . So we go through the whole thing, and we can do the testing, and the bottom line, I forget, there's a lot of stuff, we did all that and we get this report . . . and I'm just stunned. . . . I'm just shocked. Again, she has this IQ way up there, you know I don't understand, I don't understand this. . . . I keep saying, . . . I don't understand these scores. Who is she being compared to? Is she being compared with other children who are six years old?

Listening to Leah's voice, I sense that her hope for a "normal" child has been dashed. The experts and their numbers imply that Zoe too is deficient. It is as though there is an outside model of child perfection that is elusive but that must be attained. She describes her experiences with more testing and evaluations telling me numbers from tests that become her child's dominating definition. She contrasts test scores that indicate a deficiency "enough behind I thought it was time to do something" with her own doubts, and rationalization about the actual value of her child's evaluations.

I question the results of that testing. She's being compared with groups that have more schooling some of them than she had . . . I'm sure they intimidated the heck out of her. She's a huge personality. Zoe is extremely reserved and she does not just warm up to somebody. I think she was just intimidated, and she certainly didn't do her best work. I don't think the test results are . . . And how could they,

she's doing fantastic at school. She's above, at or above on everything where she should be. Now I think for her it was a confidence issue, just developmental, just maturity.

Leah ends her story by talking briefly about other people's perceptions about choosing independent education. I had already turned off the recording equipment when she continued and shared her thoughts.

I run into, from hearing other people, the stereotype that parents send their children to private school because they want to shelter them or because they want them to be with other rich kids just because the parents have enough money to do it. And I think that's not always true at all. I certainly think that happens, but I think that's certainly not true for us, none of those reasons. . . . *We felt like the school would meet a particular unique need. So that's why we did it.*

For Leah, identified unique needs become the justification that excludes her from her own perceptions of others that choose independent education "because they have the money to do it." She is exempted from her own accusation that others want to shelter their children, even though moments before she has said; "public middle school is too much for them." I sense it is hard for Leah to admit that first, she is among those whom others with less would call "rich" and second, that she too wants to protect her children. There seems to be uneasiness about being thought of as "rich."

As Leah concludes her story, I still do not know her children in terms of their relationships with others. I have no idea if they have friends and if they do, what do they do with their friends. I have not heard examples to support the comment that they are happy or "sweet" as Leah reports. I do not know their interests or who they are as individuals other than by her extensive reports on diagnosed differences and the numbers

and ratings attached to tests that shape their identities. I do not have a sense of their spirit. Their individual differences are not seen as celebration of their unique gifts, but rather as something to be “fixed.” I do know that both love to read.

***Rachel’s Story: “He’s Very Bright and It Just Takes the Right People”***

“My goal personally was that he get to kindergarten on time. And I just stopped what I was doing . . . and dedicated my life to getting Lee where he needed to be,” Rachel explains to me early in her son’s story. Like Leah, parenting has become a full time job for Rachel that supercedes a former professional life and identity. Early in her story Rachel tells me about Lee’s birth that was high risk for her and her child. Her story is a contrast of descriptions of significant needs juxtapositioned with disclaimers of the seriousness of the very issues that she has shared. Her words describe contrasts that I find conflicting. She tells me that Lee’s needs receive continuous supplemental support but she also tells me that he is not a “problem.” She describes Lee as a student “that’s extra trouble” from a school admissions perspective. I sense her plea that Lee not experience the stigma of being different and yet she herself extensively describes his differences from the very beginning of his story.

She makes it clear that Lee should not be relegated to a school identified for special needs children who are unlikely to be mainstreamed into her world of academic priorities. Yet Rachel herself tells me about the differences that have challenged Lee since his birth. All those differences she acknowledges make it difficult for Lee to be accepted into the world of independent education or special public schools that would be

acceptable to her. “He’s bright” she tells me. I hear her plea as “please don’t make my child be with those who I think are not bright” though these are not her words.

Within the world of independent schools, there is a measure of acceptability based on academics that is associated with schools attended (Cookson, 1994; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Powell, 1996). For some parents, “gearing up” a kid who in another environment might not be “geared-up” is the “return on the investment” of attending an independent school (Brosnan, 2001, p. 90). Like Cookson and Persell (1985) who describe the impact of elite independent education in their book, Preparing for Power, Rachel knows the value of being in the “right” i.e., elite schools. “Right” schools are those where making it academically is the measure of success. It is not easy for parents to acknowledge that schools noted for academics are not always the right place for a given child (Brosnan, 2001).

Rachel describes in detail the process of diagnosis to understand Lee’s challenges.

And so anyway after a long haul it was time for kindergarten and many private schools would not take him because of his history. . . .They didn’t need to take, they had enough children applying. Why take one that’s extra trouble but Friends School looked at him and what I love about Friends School was, I respected their decision no matter what it was going to be, because they took the time to have Lee visit the classroom and spend the day. They talked to every therapist that worked with Lee personally and invited them to the classroom to see their class and see if it would be a good fit for Lee.

“His year in kindergarten has been the best year for him, I mean, he just started reading, I mean, *he’s very bright and it just takes the right people to bring it out and work with him . . . because I do everything*. Besides going to school he was being tutored and getting ready for the demands of kindergarten. And I’ve worked with him all my life and so he had a great year in kindergarten.

The words “demands of kindergarten” seem harsh particularly given that this is a child who is described as needing a supportive environment, who already is working extensively with tutors and doing remedial activities on a daily basis. As Rachel says the words, “It just takes the right people.” I find myself assuming that Rachel expects that Lee will have the “right people” to work with him to “bring it out” and since she describes herself as doing “everything,” Lee should perform at a level that is acceptable to Mom. Accepting Lee’s diagnosis of “delayed” and working from a non-chronological understanding of readiness and non-academic measure of achievement, does not seem to be an option for Lee.

### ***The Search for the Right School***

For some parents, stories about making decisions about schools for their own children include references to the experience of moving to this Southeastern community and how this has impacted their impressions about public education in this region. They point out differences between their own experiences growing up in another part of the country or their child’s schooling elsewhere and their school experiences after relocating to this Southeastern community. Active looking at schools and decision making about where to send a child to school is for some a new and troubling experience. The memory of “neighborhood schools” is expressed as a lost opportunity for their own children. Rachel’s personal reflections capture some of these key themes and share her vivid memories of going to public school the first year she lived in this community.

I was born in the in the northeast and grew up from kindergarten to fifth grade went to a neighborhood elementary school, walked to school, crossing guards, fond memories. There was no question of where I would go to school. This was

the school. They were good public schools and then my family we moved here. My parents, you know, didn't go looking at schools. They put us in the neighborhood public school . . .

Most of it [the year] was spent with kids going to the office. . . . [the teacher] was petit and kids were taller than her. She was visibly you know, visibly afraid of teaching some of these kids. . . . There were kids that were being mainstreamed that shouldn't have been in that class. . . . should have been at [a special needs school] or a contained class. It was just a messy year with no learning going on.

Her perspective that other people's children should not be mainstreamed, but her desire for Lee to be in an environment that would be considered "mainstreamed" does not appear to be conflicting to Rachel.

Many parents talk about making the rounds of independent and local public schools and talk about why a specific school is or is not under consideration. What makes Rachael and Leah's search unique, is that both acknowledge that placement in a school that they consider acceptable might be difficult given their children's identified needs and ways of being. Like Heather and Yvonne's stories that appear later, rejection or fear of rejection of a child or family, is troubling for parents. Experiences have already told Rachel and Leah that there will be few alternatives for their children to be welcomed into a school community.

"There's not a lot of choices out there," Rachel explains to me as she tells me about looking for an acceptable school for Lee.

If your child is higher functioning than [a school for children with significant physical limitations and delays] but possibly needs a little assistance and there're not many preschools. There's nothing in the middle. . . . There's a big community there of us who need preschools who can work with children, you know, who might need a little more care.

Telling me that her child had been admitted to a particular preschool she continues, “He went. He did have that therapist who was helping him like two days a week and helping the teachers, but he wasn’t a behavioral problem. It was just speech and fine motor skills and social things.” The words, “needing a little more care” and her description of the help Lee is receiving, seem to be conflicting messages about what “help” and “little more care” really mean.

Like Rachel’s story of looking for schools for her son, Leah’s search also began early. Leah describes Nate’s first preschool as a “rough place.” She tells me

It didn’t seem like a lot of control over the physical contact in PE or whatever, and he didn’t know how to respond to all that physical stuff. . . . I wasn’t really happy with that part of what was going on and they did gobs of crafty things, and he hated that. So that’s when I started to think about putting him somewhere else during that year. So he was a challenge you know, so we started thinking about school issues pretty early on because of all of that.”

We found that the best way to get him in was to have him in preschool there. . . . We thought it would be great for him, all the social kindness.” He’s a real kind, gentle kid, despite all these things I tell you. It’s hard to imagine. He’s the most gentle kid you can ever imagine.

Talking about her experience with the admissions process for her son at her alma mater, Rachel’s emphasis is on her needs being met, not her son’s. “I did not find in the admission process there the support I would need.” Yet moments before, she has told me about her impression about other people’s children who did not belong at the school she herself attended as a child. Rachel’s voice takes on an emotional tone as she tells me about her admissions experience at her former independent school.

I did not like the testing process. The meeting that followed it was not a friendly process even to an alumni like myself who's given money, and time, you know as an alum. . . . I've been hurt by that experience, very hurt and I will not send any of my children there now. That was sad to me . . .

Rachel's voice drifts off as she shares her hurt. Doing the right things within an independent school, volunteering, providing financial support and a legacy connection has not resulted in Rachel's expected reward, admission of her child. While she seeks an equal opportunity for Lee, she is also hurt when she and Lee are denied equal access to this elite world. Describing her search for the right school for Lee, Rachel tells me,

I'm thorough. . . . I did my research. I mean I tackled looking at schools like I tackle anything else which is a lot of research. I mean, I went to every open house for every private school, for every public school, for every magnet school, for every school, and I looked at them all, and I met with teachers and didn't let anything like, you know, religious affiliation . . . You know I had to be that open-minded.

Quaker works for us actually. . . . I looked at Catholic, I looked at everything. It had to be the right school, the right support system, the right hands on teaching, you know, a lot of communication between parent and teacher and conferences on demand, and I mean on my part or their part.

On the one hand, Rachel describes herself as "open minded" when it comes to accepting a school's religious mission and purpose different from her own faith traditions, but her demands for what is "right" are unbending. "Right" includes full access to teachers, "on demand" and a teaching style that accommodates Lee's needs.

Leah and Rachel make it clear that they expect full access to teachers. They expect that their children will be accepted and have their needs met—even though they have both used words to indicate that their children have needs that they acknowledge



have made their children hard to place in a school. Both have talked about privileged expectations, effective strategies and compromises they willingly make to enhance admission of their children to the independent school world. Rachel talks about her own child's needs, but does not accord that "care" to children who were in her own elementary school experience. Leah describes her own child as "barreling through" yet has described her child's earlier preschool as a "rough" place and expresses concerns about middle school "violence." Neither talks about the Quaker testimony of equality or broader concepts of social justice or fairness, or even compassion, as they talk about other people's children. Yet it is because of the testimony of equality and the commitment to celebration of individual gifts and the belief that "there is that of God in everyone" or "inner light" that their children are students at this particular school.

The Friends School commitment to equality and inclusion becomes their hope for enrollment for their children.

I mean they have all kinds of kids, but they do have a good number of kids who have not been accepted at other private schools for different developmental reasons. . . . I looked at public schools, because I thought that would be my only alternative. But I was afraid my son would get lost at public school. He needs more. He needs more intervention, he needs, you know.

I went to public school . . . for one year and actually my parents pulled me out and put me at Ridge Hill Academy. I'm a graduate of Ridge Hill. I know about, I looked at public schools and I was too afraid of Lee being one of twenty-eight kids and the other issues that could be going on in that class and getting what he needed.

Her own life story is intertwined with Lee's story as she pours forth her plea for Lee and a school environment where she can either trust that his needs are met or

facilitate that his needs will be met through her careful monitoring and supplemental support both in and outside the classroom.

Both Leah and Rachel, up until embarking on their children's enrollment in kindergarten have had significant control over the teaching and evaluation of the teaching of their children. But while looking for kindergarten, Leah is stymied by a system that even she cannot navigate or control on her terms. Contacting her local public school early in her search process, Leah tells me that she was told that she could not sit in on a classroom. Her voice reflects both shock and offense as she relays that experience.

I couldn't believe that. . . . I haven't been in a public school since I graduated. How could I send my child to a school, to a school when I can't even, I'm not talking about, I'm just talking about an hour, you know. . . . So we just couldn't believe that.

Not giving up on her quest, Leah explains, "Sometimes if a man calls you get a better response." She told me that she had had her husband call the local public elementary school, "and the principal was just adamant, 'We'll tour you around the school and we'll do you know. We'll answer your questions but you're not going to sit in our classroom.'" Describing her visit to the school, Leah tells me,

I didn't have a clue as to what was going on in kindergarten, . . . It was amazing. I didn't like that atmosphere.

I have lots of friends with kids in public school. . . . Now I talk with them extensively and *they all said the key is you got to be in there and you have to have a relationship with their principal to let them know what your child needs*. And I felt very strongly that I needed a principal with an atmosphere that I could go in there and say, "Nate, he really doesn't need a teacher who raises her voice" or have something where I could really talk to them.

Leah makes good use of her social networks that help shape her impressions about schools. (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger & Majd-Jabbari, 1998, Holme, 2002) Obviously, Leah's encounter with her local public school was not going to be an atmosphere where she could "really talk to them" at least not under the terms that she considers acceptable. Therefore, without having been allowed to actually spent time in the classroom, she is now free to declare that she "did not like the atmosphere." Listening to her I felt some empathy. How could I trust a school under the conditions that she had just described?

Leah describes her experiences visiting public magnet, charter, and independent schools. "I looked at price very carefully because that was a factor. . . . I actually went and visited all these schools . . . Eventually we kind of came back to the idea that we wanted him at Friends School. He was happy there. He's doing well."

Curriculum priorities, philosophy of education, school or class size, teacher experience, spiritual values, respect of her child as a unique individual are not part of this conversation on school selection. Price and parental access to the classroom and teachers are key to making the decision for her child's education. The search for the right school is an ongoing process influenced by social networks that shape her perceptions about schools. "Oh, I did look last year at public school again when I thought he wasn't being challenged," Leah explained to me.

And also we now have two tuitions, and huge stretch. I had friends who were in public school who seemed to be happy, so thought, I need to look at this again . . . I was getting tired of driving all the time and I didn't feel like Thompson Elementary was going to be an option, okay, I had heard mixed up [messages]

about magnet schools. You know I thought magnet schools aren't really an option.

I had some friends at Thompson. We liked this area and I went over to look at Thompson. It was completely different over there. Completely opposite, but I sat in on a class and I was astounded at the negative stuff coming from the teacher, and with me sitting in there. "You kids are just lazy, how are you ever going to do this or that?" It was just, "go up there and put a check by your name"; and that means that you get some penalty, constant, the whole thing, and I was only in there like an hour . . . The whole thing was negative reinforcement and a negative environment. She clearly to me needed to retire and probably wanted to retire.

Academic achievement expressed as "doing well" is Leah's measure of success and satisfaction with her children's school. Her critique of other schools that she has observed or knows about through friends is based on the patterns of relationships that are unacceptable to her, such as perceptions of violence, teacher/student interaction that she describes as "negative," her experiences that tell her parents are not welcome at school or are not open to parent/staff communication. The absence of positive relationships becomes a critique of other schools, but positive relationships at this school are not mentioned when she talks about her children's lives. Quantitative measures of success and measurable economic benefits like success in strings lessons, are the basis of Leah's measurement of "doing well" at this school. Her child's experiences with soft and gentle speaking, positive, nurturing teachers in environment where peace instead of violence is the pattern, is never mentioned. Likewise, though Rachel talked about her fears of what might happen to Lee in public schools, her measure of "success" is that Lee is reading in kindergarten.

### **Mother Needs or the Conflicted Mother**

It is with reluctance I considered naming this part of the stories, “Mother Needs.” I feel a sense of emotional discomfort by expressing feelings toward any of the participants in this study. After all, these folks were willing to participate in this project, gave of their time, and they talked candidly about their children and their family life (Josselson, 1996; Kleinman & Copp, 1993). Unlike some narrative researchers, I did not conduct this project in someone else’s community and then have the privilege of relocating never to see these people again.

Working at the school for two years between 2005 and 2007, I saw some of these participants in that context. Therefore, it is with reluctance but with also with a question of what other name fits this story better, that I name this “Mother Needs or the Conflicted Mother.” It is not intended as incrimination. Rather it is an observation of reality, that raising children and in particular, making decisions about schooling, does raise conflicting issues, some of which are recognized and unresolved, others that are obvious to the listener of the stories, but apparently not so obvious to the story teller. This story is a humble reminder that I too have stories that may seem unresolved and conflicting to others.

Putting on my researcher hat, I want to look at this story with a sense of respect for the storyteller and with an attempt to look at the words and what is being said. This story as well as the two already shared, I believe reflect a pattern of the social construction of what is a “good” education. This story expresses perceptions about other people’s children who attend particular schools, reside in specific geographic areas of the

city, whose race is mentioned as different from their child's, assumed social class is lower, or social and cultural ways of interacting that are projected as being offensive or unacceptable to the parent (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger & Majd-Jabbari, 1998).

Children's needs I felt were often being defined by the parents' insights about the nature or needs of their child while minimizing their child's strengths or as the Quakers would say, "honoring" their gifts.

### ***Gearing Up Kids Versus Happiness***

Terry is a professional educator with years of experience in public education. She tells me early in her story that they moved to the area from somewhere else where school attendance was a matter of attending the school closest to where one lived. Like many others in this project, she is new to the world of independent education. Reading Terry's transcript again and again and listening to her voice I hear four major topics. First, Terry talks about other people's children and her concerns about sending her children to schools in a different residential area. Second, she originally chooses a school for her children that is known for academic achievements rather than a school that is more in harmony with what she later tells me are the family's political priorities. She is concerned about the child that she describes as "average" and "passive," yet her descriptions of some of this child's choices are hardly "passive." It is the average child's story that dominates her larger story. It is the average child and that child's happiness described in the context of attending the Friends School that becomes notable. Third, there is an unresolved conflict between the mother's personal career in public education and the choice that she makes for her own children's education. Despite all of this, her story ends

with reflections on the importance of Quaker testimonies and how these beliefs are consistent with her expressed family's values. The reflections act as a resolution or at least a clarification of her core priorities. Perhaps by speaking about these values they become clearer, even to her.

While many participants in this project express conflicts that are apparent to the listener, and particularly to someone like me who can read and hear the words over and over by simply playing the recorded tapes again and again, these first two groups of stories in particular are marked by conflicting views. Rachel and Leah's stories that are dominated by professional diagnosis, quantitative measurements that define success or an acceptable situation and the mother's role in making it all happen.

Terry's story reminds of the closing line used by Garrison Keillor in his National Public Radio broadcast program, *A Prairie Home Companion*. He describes the mythical town of Lake Wobegon, as the place "where all the children are above average." Being relegated to "average" in America is not acceptable for some parents. Independent education does in effect protect some children from "averageness" and what that might mean.

***Terry's Story: "We Just Assumed that Everything Would be Great"***

As I drove up to Terry's home in an upper middle class, predominately white neighborhood, my eyes were drawn to the peace dove sign in the middle of the front yard. Before I entered the door, I was anticipating "Quaker talk" of peace and tolerance of others to be a major part of her story. Instead, Terry's story includes references to and concerns *other people's children* that dominated her initial school decision-making

process. Her knowledge about education and school practices and decision-making about schooling for her own children is based on her personal experiences as a teacher and warning-like, fear-fostering advice from a network of preschool teachers and friends who support her own anxieties about her children's schooling. Her decision to enroll Chelly in an independent school was based on a rejection of public education as well as rejection of the children who attend the public schools in parts of the community where she herself has been a teacher. Her initial choice of an independent school has nothing to do with that peace sign in the front yard, nor does this choice seem to match with what she herself tells me about her child and the family. Terry's story is dominated by unresolved conflicting priorities.

Early in her story, Terry tells me about relocating to this area when her first child, Chelly, was a toddler.

So we got down here and so weren't really even concerned about schools at all. We really just assumed, we didn't know that they did bussing to integrate. We were really ignorant of that when we ended up in this neighborhood. We just assumed our kids would go to the neighborhood school and everything would be great.

Although Terry admits she was "ignorant" when selecting her neighborhood, her assumption is that her neighbors would be "great" but that by implication, other people who live elsewhere may not be "great." She describes Chelly as "passive" yet, later in her story, she describes Chelly as "strong in some ways, even though she comes across as quiet." Her examples of being strong start with Chelly's decision as a three year old to



not eat meat when she discovered that the Chicken McNugget she was eating was really a chicken, “Well, I won’t do that again” and Terry reports that she hasn’t.

When Chelly was in preschool and she’s really quiet and real well-behaved, her preschool teacher was really nice and said, “you know, you really need to look into where you are going to go to kindergarten ‘cause I think your neighborhood goes Lakeland” which was on the other side of town and was a big bus ride and the whole different kind of neighborhood and that’s when we found that out and we just realized that that wouldn’t be good at all for Chelly because she was so passive so we just thought she’d be in with the people right on our street walking to Richards basically, and that wasn’t our school at all.

All of a sudden I have learned that being “passive” works with the right kind of people—at least those who live in Terry’s neighborhood, probably white people, but by implication if you are passive and quiet, you are not a good fit with students whose skin might be brown. Walking to school even though there are no sidewalks in this neighborhood was the vision, and is better than riding on a bus that delivers you to the front door of the school. I am somewhat familiar with this neighborhood, and walking to the nearest school does not seem like an option to me.

My assumptions that this interview would be about Quaker talk of peace and equality were quickly dashed. At this point I have been listening to Terry for less than two minutes. The peace dove sign in the front yard must have been misplaced, I am thinking as Terry enthusiastically talks on. Her descriptions of decision making are marked by things being, “really, really, really, hard” or people being “very, very, very, rich,” and a continuous need to superimpose adjectives to emphasize how much she has had to endure through the hardship of sending her children to an independent school. I sense how very, very, very “unrich” she would like to convey to me that she is.

Although unspoken, I feel that we both understand that there is a difference between people who pay for school and appear to not have to limit expenses elsewhere, and those who must limit their other economic choices if choosing to pay school tuition. Paying school tuition in the range of \$15,000 or more a year is a significant amount of money that could be used for other material goods—which is exactly what Terry explains to me later in her story. While others in this project might have mentioned the economic sacrifices they are making to pay school tuition, it is Terry who elaborates on what she and members of her family would do otherwise if they were not paying school tuition.

Terry tells me that she has been a teacher in a majority black public school as she continues her story. I do not tell her that one of my children was enrolled in this particular school by our choice when it was a magnet school. *“It was really hard because I really never thought I’d have a child in private school so it was really, really, really hard. I mean it was going to be really hard to do financially. It changed everything.”*

What “everything” means appears to mean that using financial resources for independent education does not leave room for other uses of money. It is only later that she tells about family conversations where they do discuss alternative uses of their resources. Her daughter Mia is advocating that the family not spend money on independent education because she would like the family to use money for material goods starting with a larger home. As I listen to this story, I am struck by this inclusion of elementary age children in decisions about family monetary priorities that impact on something as important as education.

It almost made us think maybe [Terry is laughing now] we shouldn't have come here as we didn't realize how, how hard it was going to be for her [Chelly] so when we found The Academy we thought, *we looked at a lot of schools and the best match for Chelly* who was really quiet, pretty average academically, but she, she's probably above average academically because she was so well-behaved she comes across that way, but was always learning things at sort of the same rate as everybody else and was the type that won't get any attention drawn to her.

So I, you know, I knew that in public school she was in a big classroom she'd be the one sittin' there really quietly, and if she had trouble, she wasn't going to tell anybody and it would be hard for a teacher to notice her because she is soooo quiet and so not going to rock the boat. So we started her at The Academy and she stayed there kindergarten through fifth grade. This is her first year switching over to Friends School.

Holme's (2002) research on school choice and buying homes concludes that parents assume that school quality is directly associated with the high status of families served by the school. Terry does not elaborate on how she selected The Academy as a "best match," but she frequently refers to the wealth and higher social class associated with this school. Consistent with Holme's findings, Terry does not talk objective evaluation of education, such as examination of the curriculum or performance ratings and she is silent about the school's mission and philosophy of education and how this might be a good match for her children.

***Being average in the world of money, cliques, and white collar bullying.*** Terry's story of conflicting priorities continues to unfold. At this point, I am still not clear about what would be "hard for Chelly" in public schools. The rightness of school choice is based assumptions about Chelly's academic abilities and the assumed promise of this school as a "safe place" that Terry defines by the absence of potential physical violence. "Safe place" does not include respect of minority opinions or social class differences as

Terry tells about cliques at The Academy and describes that school as “really, really expensive” where “putdowns” by other students are an accepted part of the social pattern of interaction.

They had sort of white collar bullying but they never had any, nobody ever got hit. Nobody ever got shoved down on the playground and you know had anything stolen . . . Meanwhile my friends, you know, would talk about their kids at Simpson [the neighborhood middle school] and see’ in fights break out all the time. That, they never ever had to be exposed to. Nobody’s ever, even if people maybe, if they saw people being mean, or somebody was mean to them, not that being mean verbally can’t be bad, but they’ve never had to worry about anything like that [fights] at both [independent] schools.

I ask Terry to explain what she means by “white collar bullying.” “It’s just when you don’t hit but you’re still just mean.”

I think when I saw umm, what was happening more at The Academy because all schools when you start, the girls especially I don’t know how boys ummm, they, the girls tend to start to gett’ in *cliquey* around third grade and *excluding people* or not including people and that happened at The Academy. And you hear about it. Chelly would talk about who is in and who is out and who’s nice and who’s not.

Just typical things like who is wearing what, and who’s you know buying their clothes at Limited Too, or at the Gap, or at Target, that kind of put downs, but *never anything physical. Never stealing* or they may steal there, but they don’t have to do that, and *they probably haven’t had it modeled a whole lot for them, where as the kids from the projects have that modeled for them, that’s their way of acting out.*

Terry describes her daughter as “average.” yet later she describes her daughter’s quiet resolve, her ability to take a stand on social justice and environmental issues. She talks about how the family’s political views are significantly different The Academy families “where there’s a lot of money and it is sort of an upper, upper, upper, middle

class. I don't even know if it is. I don't know what it is. But people with obviously more money than we had during the past.”

I find myself trying to understand Terry's truth. When she discovered that her children would not be able to attend the geographically closest public school, she was sure that the assigned public school that would be reached by bus would not be acceptable. However, she has now described her friends' stories about middle school experiences in her neighborhood middle school, that is also not acceptable. Terry's contrasting views of students at The Academy and other people's children at unacceptable public schools are laid out. They may steal there [at The Academy], but “they don't have to do that, and they probably haven't had it modeled a whole lot for them, whereas the kids from the projects have that modeled for them, that's their way of acting out.” Stealing is learned because it is “modeled” at “project” schools, but if The Academy students steal, they haven't had it “modeled” as much—though Terry does not have an explanation of how these students learn stealing. I found the assumptions overwhelming when I heard them and more so as I read and listen to them again.

We thought what we were going to do was pull her out and go to public school in middle school but she really, really didn't want to do that. And I think cause it has been so nice being in a safe place so we just kinda' looked into . . . because we went to the Quaker Church and so we knew a lot about the Friends School and she was willing to do that sort of as a compromise because The Academy gets *really, really, it is expensive, but then it gets really, really expensive in middle school.*

Again there is conflicting language and assumptions. Terry says she “knew a lot about Friends School” but apparently she did not acknowledge at least initially that the school's educational priorities and cultural values advocate and model nonviolence and

peace. Yet Terry's fear of violence is a priority in making the decision to attend The Academy. It is only as an economic compromise that she shifts her children to the Friends School. Within sequential sentences Terry's story has more conflicting messages of what has been both "good" and "hard."

So this has been good for her. . . . It has been hard, Friends School is so small, it is almost harder to break in and make friends. And we weren't going to move Mia who is in third grade this year and she just kind of followed along behind Chelly and did basically the same thing. She stayed at The Academy and we were going to keep her there through fifth grade but when they [Friends School] had an opening she *really*, she wanted to switch too and I think it was mostly because her sister would, you know be at the school with her. So it has been umm *good*.

Chelly, the older one is a lot quieter a lot umm more . . . umm, easy to get along with. And Mia, the younger one is a little more aggressive, not aggressive physically but a little more aggressive academically, a little more competitive, does more of the competitive sports, . . . whereas Chelly likes to do things . . . but she doesn't like competition at all. But I think Friends School is, is *working out okay*. . . now that we're in it.

Absent from this section of the story is her acknowledgement that Friends education is intentionally non-competitive, that there are no "winners," no honor roll listing of selected students therefore no public lists that omit the "average" child, the curriculum emphasizes cooperative and collaborative learning, and there is an emphasis on learning to live within a peace loving community. Terry knows her children and has told me about their priorities, but it is only "working out okay" as she initially describes the goodness of fit for Chelly.

*A theory of the culture of poverty.* Terry has talked so much about it being, "really, really hard," that I ask her, "Tell me a little more about what does hard mean?" Terry has her own rationalization to explain why people attend independent schools and

interpretation of the “culture of poverty theory . . . attributing the low status of people of color to supposed deficiencies in their cultural values, rather than to a long history of racial discrimination” (Holme, 2002, p. 3).

I felt really, umm, because all I have done. I’m a public school you know, kindergarten, and first grade teacher for thirteen years, then we moved here. I worked for five years and umm, I’m planning to go back to teaching next year. . . . I had a really bad impression of people that weren’t willing to put their kids in the public school system because *the public school needs good kids, needs smart kids to bring everybody else up.*

In Virginia it was more, people went to private schools but the public schools were really good in [our county] . . . Maybe you went to private schools for religious reasons or you know if you were Catholic and that was, or if you were *really, really rich* you went to one of those kind of exclusive girls’ or boys’ schools but it wasn’t as normal as it appears to be here . . . I mean there’s a lot of people in private schools that are just what I consider average kind of people.

I think it does hurt the public schools a lot to pull out those very typical kids who because I know when I taught at Southside which is a harder, which is a hard school anyway *it’s only a housing project, so that’s not a typical school*, but *there’s just not a lot of strength from students* because everybody is sort of at a poverty level and there’s not a lot of mixing, and I’m sure that’s what intended to do here with the forced bussing and everything, but instead and then we did just what everybody, what a lot of people do is just say, “we are not going to participate because we’re lucky enough to have barely enough money to keep our kids out of that.” So it was hard.

*And it is hard a lot.* I mean I think the public schools are sort of the backbone of the country cause you are not going to produce much if you don’t have good public schools . . . . I see my daughters as strengths to the public schools and *I feel bad that they aren’t in there bringing everybody up.*

I find myself speechless as I listen again to Terry’s story. Though she rarely mentions race, by implication, Terry is saying that being white and middle to upper middle class is “normal” or “typical” and economically “barely enough” and attending independent school is “normal.” The entire time she is talking she is friendly, smiling,

and her words convey a sense of superiority and implication that she has nothing in common with these other people (Brantlinger, 2003). By implication, though never said, being non-white, working class or poor, attending public school is not “normal.” She’s right, her daughter Chelly, is a “backbone of the country” kind of kid who has a sense of what is right and acts upon it, without being swayed by peer pressure—even when she is at The Academy. But I sense that each time Terry tells me how “hard” it has been, how “very, very, very hard” it has been that she really means it. This is her reality. Though I do not know what alternatives she would envision and implement that would decrease her “hardships.”

“How have you resolved this?” I find myself asking her—a clear intrusion on her story. I am the one who asks about the disconnects, her gaps, and her silences about what seems so obviously problematic. I silently wonder how can she teach where she teaches? Terry responds, “I haven’t. We haven’t” and she laughs as she explains to me,

We feel bad about it. We just say *we had to do what was best for them* and they seem really *happy* and they seem like they are doing really well academically and socially and they *seem really stable*. And it just seemed to be even if it didn’t help the community at large, it helped Chelly and Mia.

Words that value care, community, relationships, tolerance, equality, justice, compassion, are totally missing in Terry’s own story. It is only in her interpretation of her daughter’s priorities where those ideals are elaborated. But her child’s priorities were not the basis for selection of independent education.

***Economic trade-offs: “It’s really hard.”*** Terry returns to the economic choices involved in attending independent education. Her story leaps from disclosing that they



have not moved to a more expensive home because of private school costs to disclosing her older child's values that are not a good match with her peers at The Academy. Again, the priorities and values that Terry talks about and seems to understand sound conflicted at least to me.

I mean we may have seen ourselves moving out of the house this size but we really can't do that. (laughs) as long as we're still doing that [paying private school tuition]. So that's been interesting because Chelly is more accepting of that and saying, "I really, I'm really okay with that," but Mia fights it more and will say, "well I think we should." She's got just a little different attitude toward things. So she'll be a little more assertive and saying, "I think we should you know, maybe it is okay if we didn't go to private school so that we could have more money-wise" and umm, so that's been interesting.

And it's been, its been good to go to Friends School, especially this year I think because, because, I think we were sort of, at The Academy where there's a lot of money and it is sort of *an upper, upper, upper, middle class*, I don't even know if it is, I don't know what it is. But people with obviously more money than we had and during the past. . . . Because we're really active politically so it was, they felt really funny during the election of 2000 because they held really, at The Academy, you know it was very 99% heavily Republican, very hea---, you know, you know, [kids at school would say] "Gore's an idiot" constantly. And that hurt Chelly a lot because *she took it really hard and she—that made her feel sort of like an outsider there.*

I think this year when we made the switch it wasn't for that reason, but I think it's been better because she's such a, she's more aware of stuff like that and she fits in better with a school that does. They are Quaker so they are going to be for peace no matter what everybody else is for. They are going to say "no we don't approve of this" and they don't have to worry about saying it and that's been better for her.

Finally, only after I have prompted her again does she tell me about who her children really are. I think I now know how the peace dove got in the front yard. It is only now that I hear the story of Chelly's life, a child who is concerned about life, others, who is "aware" and who finally belongs and is in a place "that's been better for her." I resign

myself to call this section, “Mother Needs or the Conflicted Mother” but I am glad to hear that Chelly has it all figured out.

### **Seeking a Community of Fairness**

Some mothers tell stories that describe their child or family as “different” such as an alternative family structure or racial minority. These are stories of experiences with unfairness and expressed fears for their children, because of the racism or homophobia expressed by others—in these stories—by teachers. In contrast to the first group of stories where needs are defined by quantitative measures and professional diagnosis, these stories focus on qualitative needs and a choosing a school where *fairness is a practiced core value and a commitment to relationships is an educational priority*.

These stories reflect real experiences with discrimination and an expressed desire for acceptance and full inclusion in the school community. There is little talk about quantitative measurements of academic and school success. “Needs” that are professionally defined and center on deficiencies that may have academic consequences are not the major theme in these stories. Rather needs and “deficiencies” are defined by societal deficiencies. The child and family are not deficient, it is the society that needs to change.

Nan, Heather, and Yvonne are lesbian women who chose motherhood by adopting international children, and chose to send their children to Friends School. When I asked for volunteers in this project, I did not think I knew any of the prospective participants. However, when I received the responses to my invitation to participate, I discovered that I did know two of the mothers, Heather and Yvonne, having met them

nearly twenty years earlier in another setting. I felt as though I was not an anonymous researcher. Instead it was more like a visit of old friends reunited with a common interest in each other's children and the Friends School. The way that Heather and Yvonne talked with me, using my name, was more familiar and perhaps a more candid style of talking than that of others that participated in this project. Perhaps this pattern of familiarity emerged because this project gave legitimacy to their existence as "ordinary people" instead of something else. Whatever the reason for this familiarity, this is also part of their story (Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 46).

A fourth volunteer, LaToya, is the only African American who volunteered for this project. Though not connected to Nan, Heather and Yvonne other than by having a child at the school, her story reflected a theme similar to Nan, Heather and Yvonne, meeting needs of children from a standpoint of being a minority. LaToya, like Nan, Heather, and Yvonne, was looking for a place where her child would belong and be cherished for who he was. All four of these women talked about intentional community making and the importance of family, biological or a created family, "tribe," as Heather and Yvonne called their extended family of close friends.

All of the children would be categorized as "students of color." Race and gender orientation of the mothers shape their stories of social justice needs to be met. Unlike the stories of Rachael and Leah or Terry where something is either defined as "deficient" or "unique" that must be accommodated, the stories told by Nan, Heather, Yvonne and LaToya are from the perspective of experiencing an external world that is either feared to discriminate, or that actually does discriminate.

Nan, Yvonne, and Heather all tell me that the Friends School was selected for their children because there was a mission statement that clearly stated nondiscrimination based on race and gender orientation. They all said that they believed that these statements would be supported by positive actions for inclusion and intolerance of discrimination for their children.

Unlike any other storytellers in this project, Nan, Heather and Yvonne talked extensively about the desire to be a mother, preparations for motherhood, and detailing how one becomes the mother of an internationally adopted child—a “heart mama” as opposed to becoming a “belly mama” as Nan explains.

Though I interviewed Nan first, because these three participants are interconnected, and their involvement with the school begins with Heather and her children, I will begin with her story and end with Nan’s story. LaToya’s story completes this series of stories that reflect on fairness and intentional community making.

***Heather’s Story: “I Wanted Our Family to be Just Like Any Other Family”***

Heather is a respected professional dealing with children’s learning issues. Because of her work, she spends a lot of time in public and independent schools and is very familiar with school practices, personnel, and the needs of children. She begins her story with her decision to pursue motherhood when she was in her late thirties. The adoptive process, that intentionality of becoming a mother is an important part of her story that also sets the stage for her decision making about school and church for her family. Parenting for Heather is not something that she just falls into muddling her way through.

Heather's daughter was born with a congenital condition that affected her hearing so Heather tells me that she was concerned about her daughter being in a classroom environment that was conducive to her child's learning needs. Though the adoption process and her daughter's educational needs start the story, it is the family's social justice needs and the search for fairness and community that becomes Heather's major story.

From the time she was two, being in education, it was real important for me to begin to look at making a decision as to where she was going to school and that was probably the first and hardest decision I ever made. . . . I didn't necessarily want a classroom a kindergarten classroom with 32 to 34 kids. . . . I went and looked at all different kinds of schools.

Heather pauses in her story telling and then gets the most important issue out.

*"The other issue was for Ainya, was the inclusion issue of my family."* There it was.

Reading the transcript, listening again to the tape-recorded interview, though her daughter's auditory needs are an important part of the story, it is inclusion, belonging to a community, that dominates this story. In a broader sense, this is a story of seeking a community where social justice and fairness is practiced and expected as a norm.

And the fact that she has two mom's and that's the only school in this state, you know, that puts that in their guidelines that that's not an issue for them and that they actively seek people of all different diversities. And like any other parent, you want your child to be included not excluded and welcomed and not shunned, and treated just like Mary down the street.

Listening to the recording of Heather's story, I hear myself murmuring "right" or "umm" as Heather rolls forward, talking with me as though of course I understand exactly her concerns.

So you know, you never know if that is going to happen when you go to parochial schools or public schools, or the only place I had any control over that, was Friends School. So that coupled with the fact that the kindergarten class, it, in my opinion, is one of the best in the whole city.

I just knew that it was the only place that we could go, you know, to the school potlucks and *we'd be fine as a family*, and that was really important that Ainya know that that's fine. I mean we work on that, we talk about that and read books about that, and discuss that, and we chose the church for that reason too.

Instead of choosing the free public Spanish immersion school where her daughter's native language and culture would be taught, Heather explains the dilemmas of her selection of independent education.

I'm not necessarily out, you know, in my work. . . . I knew that if I put Ainya in that [Friends] school and I could go to those family functions. I'm out at school, you know and I've through the years had kids and families from that school [as professional clients]. I just had to say, 'okay, if I lose some clients, I lose some clients,' but uh, this is where Ainya needs to be.

It may not be the easiest choice for me as a person, but this is where she needs to be. It was really hard for me because, . . . Maybe you don't know, but when you adopt internationally, you sign a lot of papers and go through a lot of questions and commitments and things about their culture. . . . You know that in the home study, that sociology person, a social worker, they ask that because the governments want to know, "Are you going to teach your child about their culture?" . . .

So keeping up with her Spanish . . . helping her become fluent in that was kind part of a bond I had and a commitment, so see it is not easy to say that you're not going to the immersion school, but for Ainya I just didn't think that was the right choice for the learning environment and for her personality.

*“We’re where we’re supposed to be.”* Fairness and social justice, doing what is right, even at financial sacrifice and possibly professional losses, was part of the larger process of Heather becoming a mother. Making difficult school selection decisions and making conscious decisions about a faith community were also part of Heather’s life story that has shaped her story about her children.

I avoided I think as long as I thought professionally I could, because like I said, it was going to be a really hard jump for me uh . . .

Well you know when you have a baby, you become a mama it’s, it’s just not you anymore, you know and it was still more for Ainya than for me, but I wanted Ainya’s family to be just like any other family and treated thusly, and I didn’t have any other assurance of that anywhere else.

You know we don’t have 100% assurance of that at Friends School. But we do have the backing of the administration and we do have it written in black and white. . . . You know if [other] families are there by mistake because they didn’t know what that meant or they didn’t think same sex families would be there or whatever, that’s their issue. They can leave, or they can have conversations about it. . . . We’re where we are supposed to be.

Heather tells me about visiting a magnet public school with an exciting curriculum that would be a good fit for her second child, Maura. She describes the visit.

The teachers were fine when we interviewed them and finally went in as a family, of course, the principal . . . she couldn’t even look at us as a family. I said, “I just can’t do that.” I can’t go without the backing and the support of the administration for our family and for Maura, so I went back and forth, and back and forth, cause it is financially hard [pause] for me to send two kids [to independent school].

*Doing the “right thing.”* “A lot of times what you do for your children is the right thing to do for you.” Heather tells me that she had been raised in the church but

we had drifted apart, sometime we would go to church and sometimes we wouldn't go to church, but not in a committed way. . . . So we started looking at churches and we knew that was on the list of questions [for application to adopt a child].

We made a conscious decision we wanted to raise Ainya in a church and we needed to go find one, just like you find a school you know. It's fine with us and what we believed in and how we were raising our child. So uh, we looked at different churches and went to different churches before we got her. . . . We went to New Beginnings a year or more before we decided on that church and before we filled out the final paper work for Ainya. We did a lot of legwork to become parents.

We don't want to raise our children in a sea of white faces. . . . You know? And when we started there umm, the norm was adopted children and a lot of them were international. . . . We have bi-racial adoptions. . . . It was just God's world with these children from all over the world and still is.

“You know” is sprinkled throughout her story. I feel as though Heather talks with me as though just because I too am a mother, surely I understand in a supportive way her decisions and the dilemmas that she has faced. I am flattered, but I am also humbled by her trust in me as she continues her story.

Did I know the doctor that she selected for her daughter's corrective surgery she interjects to ask me? “Yes,” I tell her I do. “He's who you want to cut on you,” Heather advises and I make a mental note to remember her advice.

As Heather rolls through the story of her child's life, she describes the support network that she has established for her family. “Tribe” is what she calls the collection of other single moms and same-sex couples, the “memaws” that are embraced and serve as grandfolks in her children's lives because there are no living grandparents, the church community where she really belongs, and school where she and her family are truly part of the community. Though she has experienced discrimination as a lesbian, a lesbian



couple and as a single mother, though she has shared that she's really out at school, but not totally "out" in her professional life, it is school and church where equality, full participation and acceptance as a family truly exists.

Heather acknowledges that she has the option of providing a special education for her own children, but also tells me that in her professional life she also extends opportunities to those who also have special needs. "I am also a Medicaid provider so a lot of the unfortunate, less wealthier children who have Medicaid, I also take [as clients]." She is not unaware of her own privilege and how that affects her life, as she tells about her commitment to providing services for those who have less.

She knows that I am familiar with the department in which she studied as a graduate student and she tells me about her former professors, describing the community of friends that continues to care for one another today. Friendships that become family have been a pattern that she has known her adult life reaching back at least to her graduate school days. "We are really a tribe" she tells me as she also shares how she has maintained these friendships and broadened the "tribe" support group for her children. Intentional community building permeates her life—and being part of a school community that practices inclusion and social justice is just another chapter in her story and the story of her children's lives.

***Yvonne's Story: "We Just Couldn't Subject our Child to that Kind of Environment"***

Yvonne's story parallels Heather's. They are partners and though I interviewed them individually, I am struck by the similarities in the issues they talk about and the consistency of the sequence of their stories. Like Heather, Yvonne's story begins with the

adoption process, the elaborate paperwork and approval process in international adoptions, and negotiations of intentionally becoming a mother.

Yvonne compares and contrast her two daughters, one introspective, the other the extrovert, one who stands behind “and kind of peeks around” and the other who is “the get right out into the middle to see what it’s about.” The girls’ differences are affirmed and delighted in as Yvonne explains how that her first daughter is so similar to her partner, and how Maura is such a good match in temperament and personality to her. “I think this is typical of multiple child families where the children feel drawn more to a particular parent. So we laughingly say Ainya is Heather’s child and Maura is mine. Cause we relate better to one.”

I feel as though here we are two moms talking about being mothers. As I listen to Yvonne, it is hard to not interject into the conversation adding how similar our concerns for our children really are. It is hardly an interview, with Yvonne the storyteller and me the listener—there is too much connectedness for a sterile interview.

Yvonne does not minimize the impact of “differences” as she describes her daughter and the process of decision making about schools. Her voice is soft and gentle, as she explains,

Ainya’s just such a shy little bunny that we did not want to throw her to the wolves in public school, which was our kind of viewpoint of it. Large classes, she’s very affected by disruptive behavior it upsets her . . . With her disability, we didn’t know that we would get the cooperation from the teachers to make sure she understood what was going on, cause she would pretend to not be different, and then, she is different.

At that point she was deaf in one ear, she was Hispanic in a white family and an alternative family. So we wanted to smooth the way as much as possible. . . and

because of the work Heather does, she's in and knows about every school in this area and had identified that if we could swing it Friends School was the best place for Ainya.

The way the children are treated with such respect it has opened her up and made her to be willing to risk with her just innate shyness. So it's been perfect. We've been active out at the school. It's been good for all of us.

Though she does not say the exact same words, she repeats the sentiment expressed by Heather that doing things for your kids is also good for the parents.

Talking about the Friends school, Yvonne describes the curriculum as "kid friendly," "perhaps too kid friendly" for her second child yet she explains,

That [social] curriculum will be good for Maura because she can be aggressive. And while typically it is not a physical aggression toward another person, it is very much a verbal aggression. At four and a half she stands up to her ten-year-old sister. I heard her out there in the back yard last night saying; "You don't get to be the leader all the time. You're bossing me around and I don't like it."

Describing the school culture, Yvonne explains, "It's just real flexible. There are not a lot of rules so that you can ask for what you need, and if somebody can meet those needs great, and if they can't they'll say so."

Yvonne talks a lot about her daughters' closeness, how they stick up for one another and how pleased she and her partner are that their daughters have this kind of relationship with each other. At the close of the interview, she asks me if I had already heard the story about their visit to a public school as "two moms."

"Tell me your version of the story," I respond.

Yvonne's story repeats the critical issue raised by Heather that school needed to be a community where social justice was practiced and though the public school had an

academic curriculum that was enticing, the absence of a demonstrated commitment to equality and inclusion was unacceptable.

We were looking for a school for Maura and looking for options. Looking what our choices were so we went to an open house for a magnet school in town . . . The open house was before the school even opened. We met the principal, talked to several of the teachers, really liked the school and it is the closest thing to a project based learning like at Friends School.

Then we made an opportunity to just talk individually with the principal and she couldn't meet our eyes. She just couldn't handle the fact that two women were standing there and talking to her about their child. I mean, she looked everywhere but at us, like "oh, who are these people?" You know, it was just, *we decided we just couldn't subject our child to that kind of environment*. You know out at [Friends] school they talk about all kinds of families, all kinds, and they are okay.

What I hear Yvonne saying is that not only are "they" as in other people okay, but "we" as in her family is okay—but only in this school setting. It became an ethical choice; "we just couldn't subject our child to that kind of environment" that confirmed their choice of independent education.

***Nan's Story: "There are Other Ways . . ."***

Nan is a lesbian mother with an internationally adopted child. Her story like Heather and Yvonne's begins with the process of intentionally becoming a mother, the paper work, the process of selecting a country that is "open" meaning that children are available for adoption. Hearing three women describe the process of becoming a mother, when one is a single, lesbian, older woman, I also learn that there is a network of support and information about how one adopts as a single and lesbian or gay parent.

The first sixteen of a total of twenty-four double spaced typed pages of Nan's story is mainly about the adoption process interspersed with positive descriptions of her

daughter, “she naturally is a happy child. Her cup is always half-full. I mean, there is very little—the only negativity, mostly, about this child is if something is not fair. . . . She has a very strong sense of justice.”

Finally by page seventeen of the transcript, Nan talks about schooling for her daughter. “We moved . . . because of Friends School. . . . I had planned to move . . . when I retired,” Nan explains. She had hoped that her daughter would be admitted to the Friends School for first grade, but when she was admitted for kindergarten she made the decision to commute 90 miles twice a day in order for her daughter to be at the school while also completing her own contractual work arrangement.

Ya, I’m one of those crazy people who wanted her in a Friends School. I wanted her at Friends School, first of all I saw my sister’s oldest, how she was interacting with adults, how she was dealing with injustices at five years old, six years old, seven years old.

Nan quickly moves into how her own anti war sentiments during the Vietnam War shaped her anger about war and killing. “I was a freshman, sophomore, junior in college when that horror or a lot of that horror was going on so a Quaker school was what”—Nan pauses, shifts direction, and quickly ties her political views to the Friends school testimony of peace. “Having the school be a nonviolent environment, really appealed to me, it appealed to me, whatever I needed to do. That was kind of the focus for her to be in that environment.”

***“They give them the tools to make decisions.”*** I find myself asking Nan why the emphasis on peace is so important to her. She quickly responds,

Because I think there are other ways than shaming and killing and belittling and embarrassing. I think there are, and from what I hear, and from what I read, all of that is there—all the alternatives to all the things I grew up with—power and control and authority. I mean there's authority, but they give them the tools to make decisions.

They don't do what they do because 'do it or else,' they do it because they are given the tools to do it from early on. I really don't want her scared of being threatened, you know, by "this is going to happen if you don't get these grades." They give them the tools and the [student's] goals and their curiosity, their ways take over.

Of course, I have to say that being lesbian was not a crime and that, I could talk to her and she would never, she would always hear it from me, and it would be okay. I mean I'm not sure it's not okay for some parents, but too bad you know. I mean, but it's in the [mission] statement that sexual orientation is not reason not to come here, so that's important.

Nan concludes her story by first going back again to her positive experience with adoption of her daughter. She then tells me one last story about her child. "She doesn't cry when she's hurt, she cries when her heart hurts, unless when she broke her foot last year. She has a great sense of humor, what she cries about is what hurts her heart." Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your child's life," I ask her? "No, I don't think so."

***LaToya's Story: "You Should Know this Child by Now"***

LaToya has been on a journey that she describes beginning soon after the birth of her third child when she was in her late thirties, and based on my understanding of her rambling story she is still moving around. Her story jumps from home and family in the Midwest to descriptions of her son, Raymond, her daughter's special needs, her own educational experiences as a non-traditional, older student, and back to Raymond. The journey is of separation and reunion with a larger family, and the intense closeness that

she shares with her college age daughter and middle school age son. It is not surprising that an expectation to “know this child by now” becomes her trigger point to seek an alternative in education for Raymond.

She tells about her experience at a local public middle school. Two months into the new school year in a new school, she is called in for a teacher conference. She describes what the teacher tells her,

All this horrific stuff that Raymond had said to her [the teacher], what he had been doing in class, and—which shocked me—and so then—after the conversation I pulled him outside and made him apologize. I grounded him. I took all his little Play Stations and made him pack them up, and—we weren’t going to start off the semester like that.

The last thing I said to her was, “If you have any other problems, call me at home.” And when I got home that evening she had called again! And I’m like, “Okay, what’s going on?” So I returned the call . . . She called and said she wanted to apologize because she had mixed him [Raymond] up with somebody else.

“That’s what I was so upset about when I pulled him out—even being new and two months into the semester, *you should know this child by now.*” LaToya then tells me a second episode, very similar to the first. Again a teacher calling her and telling her

the same thing about Raymond, almost exact same thing, and I said, I stopped her, I said, “Wait a minute, I just got a call from a different teacher.” I said, “Are you sure you’re talking about my son?” and she said, “Yea,” she said. I said, “Well, well it just doesn’t sound like him.” I said, “Raymond stays in trouble for talking, but that the most you get on him and he will be very respectful.” So he’s smarting off and he’s telling her so, and I don’t care, and stuff. And I said, “You and I are talking about my child?” And she said, “I know who I’m talking about. Describe your child.” And so I described him and I said, “Tell me who you’re talking about!” And she said, “He has sort of reddish hair and freckles and he plays on he football team.”

I don't have a picture of him, [LaToya says, looking around the living room.]

And I said, "That's not my child." And this is a teacher who has him.

And so I said, "You know what? You all need to get your stuff together." . . . They knew they had made a mistake, but that's when I just figured that I wanted something else—more—for him. *I want teachers to be able to know who he is*, and in the classrooms. I just thought, "it's time for you to come out of there," and that's how I managed to find—I don't even know where I got that—other than maybe going through the phone book and just calling to see—And I was really scared because it was the middle of the semester, and I'm hoping I'm doing the right thing that I applied.

LaToya describes Raymond as a "good kid" who is learning a lot. She talks about her child's desire to stay at the school and her own need to finish a graduate degree and the possibility that she might need to return to her graduate program in the Midwest.

From my perspective it seems like a complicated life and I have a hard time following the ideas, even upon rereading the transcript multiple times. She jumps around in her story leaping from Raymond's schooling, her work schedule teaching at a local college and part time job in a youth after school program, her daughter's special support needs, darting to descriptions of Raymond's special gifts in music, and then on to another stream of conversation, intertwining Raymond with what sounds to me like dogged persistence to address personal needs, family needs and the needs of kids in general. She describes her children as "very, very close" and tells me that "we've always been kind of together" and "whenever we do anything we do it with family." Continuously she returns to family closeness, her younger children with each other, closeness and missing "family" that lives in the Midwest. It is no wonder that as a mother she is outraged when she



discovers two months into the school year that not one, but two of her son's teachers do not know who he is.

There's a reality check that comes out in her story—"truth" about what happens to Black men who become enticed by sports.

Actually my baby brother was drafted by an NBA team and I watched him, he got cut. And I watched him spend years of his life, you know, basketball was all that he knew. Now he was just as smart academically, his [college] scholarship was academic, part academic, and part sports. I just felt like ya, you can do both things, focus your knowledge and so the kids that I work with at the Y, that's all they think about playing for the NFL, the NBA, and I'm like, "That's not, you know, that's just not going to happen because probably . . . I will encourage you, but I'll also give you the facts, the statistics of how many people actually make it there."

So I'm that with Raymond, I'm realistic and trying to get him to be realistic, get your education, I don't care if you play sports, you have to keep your grades up, and he's always been musically inclined. We'd go to church, he'd get on the organ, that was the first thing, and so when he chose piano, I was really happy about that. He had had a keyboard for like about a year. And so we found a UNCG student and he's taking piano lessons and he says he's got a gift, he can play it off the top of his head with no music and you think he knows how to play.

I don't know where that came from. I'm not you know, I love music, and I talk to him about music, but it wasn't me and it wasn't his dad. And he sings He's been in school choirs when he was in Michigan, He got into the Youth Choir here the first year we were here.

***"The teachers know him."*** LaToya leaps around in her story and tells me,

"Friends School fits him." I'm feeling somewhat relieved that she's back to the topic of Raymond and blurt out, "Why do you say that?"

*The teachers know him.* I just know my kid. He's a different kind of kid. He says, "eclectic." He's a different kind of breed this kid. He comes to the Y, and goes in there. He love the fact that they can sit around and do their work anywhere. . .

He's not the kid who can sit. The whole idea of making a student sit and not really knowing that person.

Quickly within almost the same breath, LaToya shifts to her work with young students in the youth program and explains her teaching priorities. Making connections, relationships are the beginning priorities when she works with young people. It is clear that she expects the same of her son's teachers.

I start them off, I say, "I expect you to exchange phone numbers with someone. As soon as you figure out that this person isn't a nut case, you have to give your number to someone, because if you can't get [the assignment] at least you have a number." I'm like that with my kids. *If you're going to teach my kid you need to know 'em.*

The fact that he can do, that he can take off his shoes. He'll take off his shoes in the Y. He's kind of a free spirit. You can't do that in a public school not every public school. He's lucked out. He's had teachers that honored that; they've accepted that. He learns differently. I teach them the way they learn.

That's what I love about that school, it's hands on a lot of times. And they treat them like young adults, the young adults that they are, and that's important. I know how kids learn, and that's how my kid learns. And if you can't respect that and you treat him like a number, and you treat him, like you treat every kid.

I am amazed as I listen to LaToya talk about her own teaching style and reflect on how she found the school that matches her teaching philosophy so closely. Leah and Rachel, whose stories are dominated by their child's deficiencies and "needs" and whose families seem financially comfortable, have made a major study of school options but do not articulate their own children's strengths, nor do they describe the teaching philosophy of the school their children attend. In contrast, LaToya's educational priorities that she values and practices are a strong match for her son's school. Her process of selecting a

school was a matter of picking up the telephone and calling the independent school located near her work and simply making a change instead of an extensive study of options. “Blind trust and tight relationships” I’m thinking as I read again how she makes decisions throughout her story.

*Honoring individual gifts—a Black mother’s social project.* LaToya tells me about her research. I am struck by her commitment to young people and her sense of “teacher as mother” (Casey, 1990). She does not talk “Quaker talk” using words like “honoring gifts” or “testimonies” but her life work as a college teacher, researcher, after school youth program coordinator and as a parent is based on those principles.

My dissertation is about black males and their disappearance in the field of writing. I’m trying to figure out who is our next James Baldwin, how to make Ralph Ellison, if we’re not encouraging black males in writing. So I’ve done all kinds of research and worked with all kinds of kids, so that’s why I volunteer at the schools, and do the different things, and I encourage kids very much. Young black males are way, way down here. Raymond is one of those.

Once more LaToya quickly swings from Raymond to her larger social project (Casey, 1990) embracing other people’s kids, particularly Black male children. LaToya’s discourse is in sharp contrast to the mothers in this project whose stories focus on the needs of their own children but never talk about meeting the needs of other people’s kids.

All kids have the same fears, the same problems, and what’s so unique about it, I can look at Raymond, and have some students writing at his level, and they’re in college. We’ve got to fix this. Everybody’s passing the buck and saying, They were like that when I got them.” And the high school says, “they were like that when I got them” and the college, a lot of colleges don’t want to do anything as far as remediation of these kids and I’m like “we can’t keep growing generations of kids who don’t write well, who don’t read. Who hate to read.”

But the fact *that he's had his voice acknowledged* that he can talk about things and I'll continue to do this. And *if you're going to teach my child you have to do that.*

Heather, Yvonne, Nan, and LaToya all know what it is to be “other” and their advocacy for their children, their selection of independent education, I believe, is not a choice for personal advantage—to be better than others, or have advantage at the expense of others. Rather their participation in independent education, this particular choice, is a moral ultimatum. LaToya says it well as she describes her turning point, but not without concern,

“I want something else, more for him. *I want teachers to be able to know who he is, . . .* and I just thought, “it’s time for you to come out of there. . . . And I was really scared because it was the middle of the semester, and I’m hoping I’m doing the right thing that I applied.

### **School as Home and Family**

The fourth group of mothers who talk about needs of their children are intentional about school selection but from a perspective that is dominated by an understanding of the developmental needs of children and families today. These stories reflect three major themes. First, these mothers talk about their children’s education based on active seeking of an alternative form of schooling, a child-centered, developmental approach, where school is an extension of what might be like a “best family” (Noddings, 2002, 2003) or “home” (Martin, 1992). They talk mainly about the educational practices of the school and each gives some specific examples to show how school is an extension of home and family. Second, relationships with peers and teachers are a priority. There is no talk about

academic coursework, or academic achievements or individual kids' learning needs or styles. Of the six children associated with these stories, one child is briefly mentioned as liking to read, another as enjoying music. These moms only talk about relationships with family and others and why they selected this school.

All of these mothers talked about the early intent to send their children to this particular school. These mothers all describe "nurturing" for their children and families that the school provides. What I learn about the basic nature of these children is in the context of the school and relationships with their children.

These mothers are seeking an alternative model of education because of their sense that there has to be something other than what they perceive or feel that they know from public school experiences or what they "know" that their children need. Public school is not rejected because of fear or disdain for other people's children. Instead the issue is educational practices. All these mothers express a determination that their children will be in an emotionally safe environment that provides the nurturing relationships that they believe children need, but because of their varied individual circumstances, can not provide for their children. Two of the three mothers tell me that they divorced during the time that their children are at the school and that they receive financial assistance that makes it possible for them to continue attending the school. Interestingly, in both of these cases these mothers also tell me that their children's fathers do not support the decision to attend independent school.

***Vi's Story: "I Just was on a Mission"***

"I was always on a mission to see different school settings and environments," Vi says describing her interest in innovative education that goes back to at least her own high school years. Before her first child was born, she reports, "I was looking for schools for him to go to." I was so struck by the strength in her voice as she said those words, I asked her "why?"

Because I hated public school when I was there. I hated school, really all my life. There were a few years when I liked it all right. . . . I hated the grades, I hated the kids being labeled, I hated the fact that there were all these pockets of children and they were treated all different kinds of ways.

This is a woman who has just told me that she read A. S. Neil's Summerhill (1993) as a tenth grader, who currently works in higher education and reports that she has a master's degree in education. She tells me early in her story that she had been an intern as a high school student, volunteering one day a week with the art teacher at the Friends School. "I was looking for that" she tells me as she described her search for the school for her first child.

I didn't want to squelch this. I didn't want him to get squelched with his desire to learn and do things, his creativity and I thought that's what would happen if he went the standard way, so I explored the Friends School and I don't even think I visited any other school.

Vi describes her son as "a natural reader, loving school, hating to miss. He loves sports but does not play competitive sports;" he has a "really nice core of friends that he grew up with at the school." A sense of optimism accompanies her ready laugh as she

explains that her children are bi-racial and tells me about her ultimate divorce from their father, significant financial debt due to family business failures, and explains how she has managed to keep her two children in independent schools.

The schools [referring to both the Friends School and the private high school her older child now attends] have been fabulous, they've been very very generous and helped us out. I mean they would have had to go to public schools, and I would have had to declare bankruptcy had the school not helped us.

***“The top priority in their lives is their schooling.”*** Snippets about her children, their school, her pregnancy complications, a former marriage she calls “unhealthy” followed by abandonment and divorce, unsuccessful business ventures, her new fiancée, are all intertwined as Vi runs through her story. She is on her lunch hour, and she is talking fast in the midst of the work cafeteria, laughing as she unloads her story with quickness and exuding positive energy the entire time. She takes a breath, grabs a bite of salad and says, “I don't really know where to go. I just know I've jumped all over the place.” Listening to Vi, I marvel at her tenacity. In hopes of getting back to the original topic of the story of her children's lives I suggest, “If I'm hearing you right, it sounds like when you had children the issue of where they went to school was important from the very beginning.”

“Oh yes!” And again I intrude into her story and ask “Why?”

Well to me, it was the most important things in their lives. What they do everyday, how they spend their days. I was the same way about the day care centers they went. Because to me if I'm not there taking care of them everyday, well for one thing I wanted them to be with other children, plus I had to work so there were some givens.

So given ideally I would have liked to stay home with them, and been with them and maybe taken them to little half-day programs to have social involvement with other children but to me the top priority in their lives is their schooling until they are old enough, 18 to 21 to 22 or whenever they branch out and take care of themselves.

They spend their whole waking day in their school environment and I didn't want them to have to uh, as I mentioned before, have their desire to learn squelched or their creativity squelched or the uh, uh, pressured by the kinds of or just be treated like non-humans in some cases the way I've seen some teachers do. The way I grew up which maybe not fair, you know, there may be a lot change.

She tells me about an experience with a close friend's daughter at a public school.

Listening to the tape, I'm still not clear what really happened, but Vi concludes that story,

It just reinforced my old opinions of what was happening in the schools. If kids can't sit in a desk and do rigorous certain amount of things, then they are labeled, as you know, having problems. I even suspect all the ADD, I think it's going way out of hand, all this labeling, "oh I'm ADD. I'm going to get." No you're not. You're just a human being; you're trying to put yourself into a prescribed behavior pattern. It may not be what you have to be or supposed to be. I just have multitudes of reasons.

Vi is very up front with me telling me examples of how her children have expressed hurt and anger by the loss of their father and she candidly shares the possibility that her children might have to have counseling to work all those issues out, but she does not want her children hurt or harmed by school practices. *"I feel like I don't want my children ridiculed in front of the class by some teacher, it can ruin them."*

There's a lot that Vi seems to manage on behalf of her children because she is sending them to a school that she implies supports her children being who they are supposed to be and provides the nurture that she would give them herself, but can't because she is at work. The rest that she can't control, her children will need to work out



themselves when they are old enough to do so. I find myself chuckling at her comment that they just might need counseling to work those issues out. But I sense that with reference to school and how school impacts on her children she has that part handled.

***School: “That’s where they create all their friendships and their relationships to adults.”*** Vi is very clear about the role of school in children’s lives.

It’s been my top priority. To me it always was the most important thing, where they went to school because they spend their whole lives there. That’s where they create all their friendships, and their relationships to adults and everything in our society, the way it is, at least where I am in this area.

We’re just not an agrarian family where you know everybody is helping each other. It’s just like that so wherever they are in school is going to be their lives; those are their daily lives. Once they get home, they’re scrambling around to get something to eat, to rest, to play, do homework, whatever and go to sleep. So their lives are their schools so I just feel every moment of their lives are important. I didn’t want to delay it until later.

Vi’s voice exudes firm determination as she shares with me her response to her fiancée when he questions how they will send all their children to private school, “we just have to send them anyway, find a way.” I believe her.

Vi acknowledges looking at another independent school, but says she never considered public education. “I hated them. And it has just be reinforced,” as she tells me another story, this time about her fiancée’s daughter being ridiculed at a public school. “The kinds of things that go on . . . they are unpredictable. You don’t know when it is going to happen. It just happens, and the kid has, you know, a lifetime to sort it out why they were treated that way.” Vi has a lilt in her voice and gentle laugh as she firmly finishes, “I hate it. I wish everybody could go to this school.”

Vi never talks about the financial hardships of sending her children to independent school, though she talked openly about personal financial problems. She never talks about how much the school costs though she readily offers that she has received financial assistance since becoming a single parent. Clearly schooling for her children and her role in providing it, is “the top priority in their lives.”

***April’s Story: “One of the Most Important Things They Teach There, to Get Along With One Another”***

Like Vi, April’s introduction to Friends education begins before she became a mother. They both enrolled their children in the school as fully self-paying tuition. Now due to changes in financial circumstances, both receive need-based financial assistance that makes it possible to stay at the school. Like Vi, April focuses on the school’s teaching practices and how they have supported her children and family.

April describes her first visit to the Friends School preschool program. As part of her job as a special education teacher she was charged with creating a developmental program for preschool age children with highly specialized teaching needs. She tells me that she has had extensive experience in day care programs and public school classrooms. Visiting local programs early in her career she discovered the Friends School.

When I went there, I told myself, “If I’m ever lucky enough to have a child, I’m going to do whatever I can to bring them into this situation.” Because it just gave me a total sense of peace to be there in that classroom. And every single person in that room—just seemed so at ease with who they were, and what they were doing there, the children—there was no distraction when I walked in the room—The children—you know, they were involved with what they were doing.

There are lots of wonderful child care centers in [this county], but—just listening to what they have to say and what their philosophy was, made me so happy. And

I'll never forget what [the director] said, he said "If you ever have a child that goes to school here, just be careful—because they learn to think for themselves, and they learn to love to learn." And I will never forget that as long as I live. 'Cause it's totally true. So when I left there that day, I thought, "Well, I may be back here someday!"

I was able to see a whole lot of what the teachers had to deal with, what the children had to deal with, and what their opportunities were, and the kind of language that was going on, and stuff like that. So of course when you have a child of your own, you want to do everything you can to make their life—I have this weird idealistic view of what children's lives should be. Too idealistic, I think, maybe. So you wanted to make all the perfect decisions, and *you want their life to be perfect, and every blanket to be soft*, and—you know. I've learned a lot. But anyway . . . so the perfect school to me was Friends School.

*The price of every blanket being soft.* April tells me about applying to the school and how this desire for the perfect life where every blanket is soft, was not a goal shared by her husband. "He was totally against it." She describes the couple's annual review of the decision to continue attending the school as a "source of contention because of the money that it cost." . . . "It was so worth it to me to make any sacrifice I could to keep her there, because I wanted Nella to learn to think for herself and I wanted her to love to learn."

April describes the difficulties in her marriage and refers to the trade off that she made to keep her children at the school. She seems careful to not be specific. Sticking to an overall assessment of the situation.

We're just polarized. And so the fact that it cost money and the fact that—he had different priorities for the children than I did. . . . It was a huge reason I hung on to our marriage, because I knew that I could pay for them to go to school there if we had two incomes. And that's just the total honesty of it all, right there.

She describes school as “giving her, them [her children] academically and socially, ‘cause they didn’t see the things socially at home that I wanted them to learn in their life, and so there [at school] they did. Does that makes sense?” she asks me. I find myself nodding and murmuring “yes” each time she asks if I’m following her line of reasoning.

She describes her children’s educational experience as “putting her children in situations where they knew they would bloom.” Even though she has described her daughter as being afraid of men as a young child, she says that her children were able to go off on school trips because they had “no reservation whatsoever, cause they trust them [the teachers] that much.”

I find myself asking how they developed that trust, and April immediately explains the school’s social curriculum, and the process by which students develop their own voice, and how each classroom spends time developing their own class rules. I am already familiar with the school’s social curriculum based on the work of the Northeast Foundation for Children, that is explained in Ruth Sidney Charney’s book, Teaching Children to Care (2002) and nod as she tells me about the process.

***“Nobody was allowed to mistreat anybody.”***

They know that emotionally that they would be safe there. And then they saw—even the slightest little breach of those rules was not punished, but was attended to, and if they had difficulty maintaining,—you know, keeping their body still, of if they had . . . trouble following the rules or whatever.

Ryan knew that he could go and have some time to get himself together, and do something that helped him to get centered again before he came back [to the group] . And it wasn’t considered to be wrong, and they were never considered to be punished, but they knew that everybody there would treat them safely, and

nobody ever laughed or criticized, and they didn't have to be ashamed of the things that went on at home. . . . They felt totally safe in that environment to be who they were, 'cause they saw nobody else was mistreated and nobody was allowed to mistreat anybody.

She describes the Friends School educational approach as adjusting “to the way the children learned rather than expecting them to learn the way they teach.”

Responsiveness to individual needs is what she talks about as she tells me that Ryan spent two years in kindergarten to foster his emotional development. His second year, she tells me,

He already knew the rules. They used him to explain a lot of the rules, and set examples, and give examples of to do some things. . . . He really felt like he was empowered. . . . They put him in the position of being a leader. . . . When you expect things of children, they reach those expectations.

April tells me that she thinks that all the people who attend the school have “some of the same reasons for being there.”

“What do you think those reasons are?” I ask her. She responds with long pauses interspersed between her phrases and sentences.

I think some people are there because of the academics. Because of the school's—because the school has—shown that most of the children that graduate from there go into high school at the advanced placement level. And so they're wanting their children to excel academically.

But I think for the most part, *the people are there because their children are happy and their children want to go to school*, and their children want – they're excited about what they're learning.

I know that sounds kind of trite, but it's true. And they're—they're—you just don't see—[April waits with a long pause] I don't know how to say—you don't

see little cliques of people. You just see this big—gathering of people mixing all together.

But I think people feel like—*it's a safe place for their children to be, emotionally. And—people that really want their children to have a high consciousness of social skills and our responsibility to the rest of the world—that's another reason why, because they teach that. That's one of their social skills—one of the most important things they teach there, to get along with one another.*

“And that’s important to you?” I find myself intruding into her story once again.

She pauses, and then speaking very slowly she adds,

And to respect other cultures. Because people are people are people, and my parents—you know—they all—we all lived with prejudice. And that’s just something I have never understood! And I don’t mean to say I’m Miss Queen of the World, but—I just never understood that. So that’s important to me, because I don’t want them to look at people’s hair color or eye color, I want them to look at people. . . .

Dealing with children who are diagnosed as handicapped, they are a minority, and they are definitely, in my opinion. People judge them for the way they look and so forth—so that’s a form of prejudice that I’ve been so aware of. I just don’t like it! So that was one of the reasons.

School and the relationships she has experienced there have helped her learn to be a better parent. “I can look around and see what other parents are doing, and I really like that, so I model them.”

April concludes her story saying, “I don’t know if that was what I supposed to say.” I find myself thinking that she has said a lot about why some parents choose independent education, speaking from her heart with honesty, without shame, and as she has hoped for her children, emotional safety. She has made a decision about the education of her children, to meet their needs, regardless of the financial or personal costs.

***Deanna's Story: "I Needed a Place that Could Make Me Comfortable"***

Deanna begins her story telling me about herself. Even though I asked her to tell me the story of her child's life, her story begins with herself, "marrying late," "had my kids late" describing her career as a freelance artist, who works from home with a fair amount of flexibility, but who also needs to be out of the country for "a big chunk of time" (six weeks each fall). It becomes apparent from the beginning that who she is has highly influenced the selection of childcare and schooling for her children. School as she describes her needs must be an extension of her family and reflect what any "best family" would do (Noddings, 2003). School choice is about meeting her need as a parent to be a good parent.

I needed to know that they would be in a place that would know about us, about our family, besides my just personal need for my kids to be loved and nurtured, and recognized for who they are which is bottom line, on how I am making all my decisions.

I needed them, you know, I needed a place that could, as I say, *could make me comfortable*, knowing that while I'm gone the kids will be cared to as far as some rough times, even though they did, they have been fine, but it's my anxiety about going away that I want caretakers to hug them extra much while I'm gone, and as I said, just know sort of know about us as a—who we are.

She describes her husband as being "very involved" that he "can and does take care of the kids for the whole time that I'm gone" yet she describes the research process of looking for schools for her children, in terms of her own role.

I started my research. . . . I went to our local school. . . I didn't like the largeness of the whole thing. . . . Just seemed like masses and masses of kids and I somehow felt that I might want my children to be in a safer smaller place. And I will tell you from the get go it's me. They don't know. They go and they make

their friends, and lots of kids go to public school, and they are fine. It was I, I know that it was. *I needed something else.*

She asks me if I'm interested in why she did not select another well-known independent school and quickly answers. "I had a bias against it. It just seemed like elite. It felt like it was too hoity toity; it was everything about private schools that I somehow did not want to be part of. I didn't feel I needed to compete with them."

*School as "nurture, safe, loving family style."* Upon initially visiting the school, she said she found what she was looking for, "and that specifically is nurture, safe, loving, family style. And I have not been disappointed." She spends time explaining to me and perhaps justifying her need to be out of the country, explaining the cycle of work world, the "need to do what you have to do" on someone else's schedule.

I can not dictate when I go. So it is nerve wracking for me that I go just at the beginning of the year when everybody is trying to settle in. We make a choice as a family. This is where we spend our money . . . I have to say that my husband and I never say, "maybe we shouldn't," or "make a change on that." We just; both of us feel very strongly that it is a great place.

Her choice of schooling for her children seems to make it easier to continue enjoying her career, knowing that her children are in a setting that fits her needs, as well as her perceptions of their needs. I say, "her perceptions" because in rereading her transcript, though she describes her children's personalities, she does not talk about their experiences at school, just her experiences related to the school that she has described as like "home," and "knowing" her and her children "like family." Like Vi, and April, there is a need being fulfilled here—an alternative model of education that supports each of



their families to being more like the ‘best’ families that Noddings (2002, 2003) and Martin (1992) describe all children as needing.

When the taped interview is over, Deanna asks me if I would like to see her studio. I am of course interested and accept the invitation. As I hear her explain what she does and she shows me the projects that she is working on. I sense that Deanna loves her career, is professionally successful, and has a work arrangement that suits her lifestyle. As she has shared in the interview, she has made a decision to have her children attend a school that is an extension of home for her family. For the most part, as she has shared with me, it appears that she has also created a career where her work is also family focused much as the traditional homes of long ago where kids see their parents work, know what they do, and are familiar with the means by which the family creates their economic support. She has figured out how to not “cross the bridge” every day, like the metaphor in Virginia Woolf’s (1938) Three Guineas. As a result she has made both personal and school decisions that minimize the “domestic vacuum” in her children’s lives (Martin, 1992).

**CHAPTER V**  
**ANALYSIS—UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS**

It is tempting to frame the analysis of this project into two opposing educational camps, the public sector on one side and the independent sector on the other, each lined up with guns loaded and attacking the other with bulleted lists of judgments declared to be “good” or “deficient.” The philosophical basis of an educated public has been addressed in earlier chapters. Accessibility to education is acknowledged as crucial for the flourishing of a free and democratic society. However I believe that the lived experiences of parents as they share their children’s stories and the perceptions of their children’s school experiences reveal that *certain conditions* perceived as positive for children can and do exist in both independent and public education.

We [Americans] are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which man is subject. . . . *Under certain conditions* education may be as beneficent and as powerful as we are wont to think. But if it is to be so, teachers must abandon much of their easy optimism, subject the concept of education to the most rigorous scrutiny, and be prepared to deal much more fundamentally, realistically and positively with the American social situation than has been their habit in the past. [*italics added*] (Counts, 1969, pp. 3-4)

**Education and the Right to Happiness**

Counts challenges teachers to scrutinize education, to determine the remedy for social ills, but I propose that it is also important to identify what are the powerful and beneficent “certain conditions” that parents who have chosen independent education

reflect upon, as they tell the story of their children's lives. While the role of professional educators is important in shaping education, I believe that the voices of parents can provide enlightenment about the nature of those powerful and realistic "certain conditions."

*Happiness* is the word most commonly used to describe those beneficent and powerful conditions. "The precise characteristics and boundaries of happiness have yet to be adequately characterized by empirical research" (Campbell, 2006, p. 31). In examining Education and Happiness by Nel Noddings (2003), Campbell concludes,

Happy people in a liberal democracy are able to use their freedom to find ways of developing their talents and satisfying needs without sacrificing the goodwill of other citizens. *In educating for happiness, equality is interpreted as equal opportunity for students to develop their own talents, characters, personalities, and ways of life.* [italics added] (p. 32)

Interestingly, while describing their children's happiness in public schools or their unhappiness in either public or independent schools, parents never refer directly to socialization as an *intentional* part of the curriculum. They do not talk about "equality" when they describe the conditions where their children are developing the fullness of who they are—and are "happy." However, when describing children's experiences that are not "happy" parents do identify socialization practices that they consider problematic and as interfering with their child's education or happiness and that come in conflict with parents' socialization standards. Parents in this project seem to grasp the conclusion that is drawn by Nel Noddings (2003).

What we have to do . . . is to help all children develop the dual capacity for caring and for healthy guilt when they violate their responsibility as careers. Beyond that—beneath it, perhaps, as a foundation—*we must provide the conditions under which children can be truly happy* [italics added]. Happy people are not cruel and violent and, because they do suffer with others, they will act to prevent or alleviate that suffering. (Noddings, 2003, p. 49)

A second interpretation of “certain conditions” may be the contrast of traditional education, based on a model of the transmission of information from a knowledgeable person, the teacher, to the student who “knows less” with progressive educational practices that Brantlinger and Majd-Jabbari (1998) describe as “loosely framed, child-centered, problem-oriented and multicultural” (p. 432). As Brantlinger and Majd-Jabbari suggest there is a general lack of support for progressive pedagogy that permeates many public schools. They arrive at this conclusion because progressive education, based on democratic principles of equality, does not advantage certain children over others.

Perhaps parents who talk about “happiness” are parents who actually do support and affirm the educational goals and practices of progressive education, i.e., equality, where the focus is on meeting the needs of the individual child and on learning to live with others. When parents don’t find those practices in either public or independent schools, they describe their children as unhappy and they seek alternatives. Perhaps the real issue is that when relationships are important, then equality may be more intentionally practiced and children are “happy.” *Whatever the basis for “certain conditions” it can not be ignored that in the process; moral lessons are learned at school.* What those moral lessons are may either be in conflict or supportive of the

family's values, but until they are experienced at school, they are not generally articulated by parents who participated in this project.

[Schools] mean to affect student behavior in ways that are consequential to their lives. Thus, what they do, accordingly, is engage daily and invariably in moral decisions and moral actions, notwithstanding that they would not necessarily label their decisions and actions as moral. . . . It is more normal, more descriptive to identify what happens in schools as teaching and learning. (Peshkin, 2001, p. 107)

Tess and Reece share stories of both public and independent schools when responding to the prompt, "Tell me about your child's life." Their stories stand out as they describe the contrasting conditions in the schools their children have attended. Both had very positive experiences in public schools and later talked about school experiences that were so difficult to accept that they chose to leave public schools to seek independent education. However, independent education, as shown in Reece's story is not to be assumed as always a positive experience. Tess and Reece describe their children in positive ways, not with the "deficiency model" used by some mothers in this project.

### **Happiness and Socialization**

When describing their children as "happy" at the Friends school, parents often refer to the school's intentional "social curriculum" (Charney, 2002). They can describe the process with detail and they talk about how the school's social curriculum impacts their children and contributes to their children's contentment with school. Interestingly, when parents talk about the need for academic challenge or rigor or the absence of an acceptable academic curriculum, I did not hear a parent describe their child as "happy."

I believe that certain conditions that are described as conducive to happiness at school are related to either an overt social curriculum that focuses on relationships or educational practices where positive social relationships are practiced—regardless of the actual “academic rigor” delivered or professed by a specific school. Tess’ story in particular points out this pattern of talking about happiness in the context of positive relationships with a minimal emphasis on academics. Unhappiness is expressed in a context that also questions academic standards.

Reading these parents’ stories again, I propose the possibility that talk about academics becomes the scapegoat conversation when there is an absence of positive relationships. Does “academic performance” become the conversation when there is a perceived distance between the parent and the school and teacher social practices that are in conflict with parents’ expectations, particularly socialization expectations and experiences that may be tied to social class? Does academics become the conversation because of a taboo on discussing social class differences in child rearing and child socialization practices?

Reece and Tess’ stories are dominated by examples of certain conditions. These stories do not begin with values, but both conclude with reflections on the core values of Friends education and a recognition of the importance they assign to these Quaker values.

***Reece’s Story: “It’s Not What You Want to Teach Your Children . . .”***

When I met Reece at her home, she was wearing a bright red sweatshirt with “NEBRASKA” written across the front. It is not often that I see someone wearing Nebraska wear, so I asked her about the shirt and learned that she had grown up in

Lincoln, Nebraska, as did I. That shared background may have influenced this interview. Frequently Reece would use the phrase, “you know” as though Reece was not asking, “did I know?” but rather a statement, “you do know what I’m talking about.”

Reece describes her son, Rob as a “funny” child who learned to read around the age of three. “We didn’t teach him how to read, but he picked it up.” She describes his early years in a public school in Lincoln, a university and college-dominated city.

He could read quite well by the time he got into kindergarten. . . . They had just this wonderful program, where if you were ahh, what they considered well, what they consider here as highly gifted, they have a gifted program here, umm, then they would get a mentor for you and you would have a private mentor during part of your school day.

He’s a very different child . . . He’s very independent . . . He knows what he wants . . . He wants to be independent. . . . He can be sweet and, and thoughtful and friendly, but he is also very stubborn and you know has to have things just so. You know, that is really his personality; I mean it’s just the way he is . . .

She interjects smiles and laughs with her descriptions of Rob. Her conversation focuses on her delight in his differences that make him special and their relationship. Briefly mentioning Rob’s academic strengths and she never discloses Rob’s actual test scores but does say that he had been identified as “highly gifted”. Like so many in the later section, who talk “Quaker speak” she repeats several times the line, “it’s just the way he is” with a voice of acceptance of her child and her joy in his being just as he is.

Reece tells me about his early years of schooling in the Midwest. “He had three years of having a language mentor and a math mentor and it was wonderful, a wonderful experience for him. He, he learned so much and you know, all those things, and he, he is just such a funny kid.”

Though he must be a very academically capable student, it is his funniness, his sense of doing what is right, that stands out as Reece describes Rob and his school experiences. She describes her relationship with her boys saying they are “a joy of life. We have lots of friends who come over and they are all academics, and they love the kids, and the kids are just really comfortable talking with adults.” Describing how Rob understands his world, she tells me,

He is, has to follow the rules. I mean, you know, for example, there are rules and you follow the rules, which doesn't go over well, you know, with kids all the time because he's just like, “if you do it, these rules are good.”

So umm, that makes him sometimes an outsider because like [and Reece pauses], in school he knows he's not supposed to talk and he won't. But other kids will be, you know, and . . . [Again she pauses] I think that doesn't help him get along all the time. Umm, So he went through those three years and he was doing really well umm, and then we moved here.

Her story is interspersed with laughs. “You know?” and pauses as she appears to be reflecting on what she has just said. Given that I too am a Cornhusker transplant, I may well have been perceived as supportive of her comments with my head nods, smiles, and murmurs of “umm” as she talks. Therefore she may be more willing to be candid about her comparisons than she might have been in another setting, but still she is careful in how she describes those contrasts.

Reece describes her son's experience in the new public school and the differences that she found herself trying to understand after moving to a midsize city in the Southeast. Reece is married to a professor at the local university. She tells me that she grew up in a professional family. Listening to her talk, I feel that she reflects an almost



blind faith that the public schools in her new hometown would provide an educational program where she would entrust her children, as she appears to have done in Nebraska. She interjects nervous laughter and pauses, again frequently adding “you know” as she talks about Rob and his older brother in the new school public school system that she describes as “different.”

Reece speaks carefully as she begins to explain about Rob’s experiences at school. She smiles as she talks.

We didn’t know much about the gifted program or anything like that. We just assumed you know, we gave them his transcripts and they would figure out what to do with him. And he went to class and he would come home and say ahh, “the class was too noisy and we had silent lunch,” or “the class was too noisy and the teacher screamed at us to ‘shut up.’” . . . This, the school’s very, very different from what he was used to.

My sense is that this school is also very different from what Reece is accustomed to and that “different” is Reece’s word for deficient and unacceptable. She describes the community and schools of her former home using words and phrases like “homogenous . . . organized . . . supportive of teachers . . . with clarity of social expectations, understood by families,” and teachers with a perceived “low rate of turnover.” She uses the word “structured” to describe that, which is familiar to her.

So he went from this very structured you know, the people, kids basically did what they were supposed to do. They were under control and you know, teachers, the teachers had been there so, long enough so they all knew what everyone expected of the students and they worked on it from kindergarten through fifth grade you know. They had this set of, okay, “this is what we’re gonna do,” so they were well umm, controlled environment you know.

The kids behaved well. He comes in to this and it's like chaos [said with emphasis and a nervous laugh] and he's not used to that... And he comes home and he's says, you know, telling me all these things every day. . . . I guess, when it comes to language I'm conservative. My kids think 'shut up' is a bad word.

She describes the episode that caused her to look at alternatives in education for Rob. She is nervously laughing while she tells the story, and her concerns are reflected in the strength and sharpness in the tone of her voice as she tells me about the first turning point that begins her journey that ends eventually at the Friends school.

Then he came home and he said at school the teacher had given them a riddle, . . . It was like, "when I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives, and seven wives had . . . , and at the end, how many were going to St. Ives?" Well it is just one, but she asked a riddle like that and the kids all guessed. And no one could get it, and finally one kid got it, and she was so amazed that she left the room and when she left the room these kids came over and started beating on the kid who got it right.

And at that point I, we went over to the principal and said, "Have you looked at his transcript? You know, is there a gifted program in this school system? You know, what is going on here? This is ridiculous.

It is only when Rob's school experience becomes totally unacceptable that Reece use Rob's academic talents to begin a conversation with the school's administrator about a need for change. Asking about "gifted education," is Reece's means of talking about a change because the practices at school were not acceptable. Reece infers by her question, that "gifted" students do not behave inappropriately at school and that teachers can manage gifted students. Though it is the style of social relationships that are the real issue she describes in her story, this is not the basis of the conversation with the principal.

Instead she inquires about “gifted education.” I have to wonder if talking about differences in socialization practices is taboo, but “gifted education” is not.

At this point Reece’s relationship with her child’s education shifts from a situation that she apparently did not have to proactively monitor, to a situation where she is now a vigilant advocate for Rob.

“Was your son the one who got it right?” I found myself intruding into her story.

“No, he was not, it was someone else. But he was, like,” she laughs again, “he was, he’s traumatized.” Rob’s mother sounds to me as though she too is traumatized. Every time she shares a part of her story that is a criticism of Rob’s education, she pauses, interjects “umm” and other delays, before she continues. It is as though she wants to be careful how she says what she says. Commenting on the social patterns within the current school seems uncomfortable to articulate yet she has known something else and she is observant of the differences that she perceives her child is experiencing now but does not address them directly.

Brantlinger’s (2003) research on social class and parent perceptions of quality of education finds that there is a relationship between the social class of teachers and the social class of the students that they teach. Reece has described Nebraska schools as “homogenous” with a “large middle class,” but she does not use contrasting words like “heterogeneous” or “working or lower social class” to describe what she is experiencing in her current school. She does not talk about social class differences between the teacher’s style of teaching and her own expectations for Rob.

*Learning moral lessons at school.* Reece discovers that there is a once a week pull out program for gifted children at her son's school. Upon further conversation with the school officials she is encouraged to seek admission in a magnet school for highly gifted elementary age students to which she transfers Rob within two weeks. Brantlinger (2003) finds that upper middle class and educated parents seek advantages for their own children through privileges like gifted education thereby increasing social class stratification. Hearing Reece's story, it must also be asked if the school also uses privileged opportunities like gifted programs to avoid dealing with the socialization practices that some teachers use in school.

Describing Rob's experience at the school for highly gifted students Reece reports,

He came in two weeks. The kids were very friendly, and he made a lot of friends really quickly, and he enjoyed it a great deal. The teacher was wonderful. . . . The only problem with that program, is, [pausing] is their concept of integration is putting three totally white classes in the worst all Black school in the city across from a project where there is occasional gun fire and the school had at least three lock downs the year that he was there.

After that year, I said "this is ridiculous, I'm not going to put my child's life in danger for an, an education." I loved the program. The teachers were great. The kids were great. You know, but, I just couldn't and *he was getting the wrong message.*

You know, the kids, they'd be out on the playground, at the same time as the Black class and Rob couldn't understand what a lot of Black kids were saying and he'd come and say, "why don't they speak so you can understand them?" And the Black kids are, "Oh good, those dirty white kids are getting off the playground." *You know, it was just not, it's not what you want to teach your children about getting along with other people. It is not a good situation.*

What I have perceived as Reece's passivity about education is in sharp contrast to some other mothers in this study who describe their extensive research and the process of "making the rounds" to learn about schooling options for their children. Reece never mentions getting advice about schooling from friends, neighbors or from extensive personal research, as many of the other mothers mentioned in other sections of this project.

Though the highly gift program was very strong academically, the social learning in that setting was "not a good situation." Interestingly while describing her son's Midwest school experience, Reece never discusses the social dynamics—only the strengths of the academic program and the progress her child was making in learning. By implication the moral lessons learned in that setting I am assuming were acceptable since this topic was not a part of the story. But a strong academic program without an acceptable social curriculum is not acceptable to Reece.

Reece is not only concerned about the moral lessons her son was learning at the gifted magnet program but also issues of fairness and equality among the parents. She continues telling me about being at the public school for highly gifted students.

It's a weird dynamic because umm, the people who are in the Level Three program are mostly running the PTA, which is just, just; it's just odd, the whole thing is odd. So after that year, which was a very interesting, I mean, he met some of the nicest kids, and I would have loved to have kept him in that program. I just; *I just didn't like what it was teaching him.*

Though she never uses the words, social justice, fairness, or equality, her articulated observations summarized as "it's not what you want to teach your children" or

“weird” indicate a strong sense of concern about issues of equality as she reflects on her child’s experiences and observes the school’s volunteer leadership. After one year, Reece seeks another educational setting for Rob and decides to try an independent school.

We went totally the other way and umm, we decided to put him to private school. So Weston is the only college prep umm, school, private school . . . that I knew of that I could figure out from looking at, umm information.

She does not indicate that she visited other schools, talked with friends or proactively researched educational options before enrolling her children in school or prior to changing schools. Though she is a middle-class professional parent, Reece may be outside an informal social network “to mobilize the information, expertise or authority, needed to contest the judgments of school officials” (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003, p. 319). Perhaps she is intentionally avoiding those contacts where there is a social construction of the evaluation of schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger & Majd-Jabbari, 1998). As an academic family new to the community and to the southeast, it may be that Reece is totally oblivious to such a network that creates and informs others about reputations of schools (Holme, 2002). She continues her story.

So we put him in Weston for the next year which was fourth grade. Umm, and he went there and the kids are, basically, what they do is, they have about twelve new kids and they had three fourth grade classes and they basically split up all the new kids into three classes. Except for the kids in the class, basically their idea was, you know, let’s make fun of the new kids. They just were not accepting of new children. It would have been better to have all twelve, in one class so they could at least make friends with each other since the kids who had been there for a long time weren’t gonna be friendly at all.

So we did that for one year and . . . I felt like he wasn’t learning anything. Part of the problem was that he had done so much in Nebraska that you know, the Level

Three Program wasn't bad but he was repeating in math, because he'd gone, you know, he'd already done all the stuff they'd done in math.

Umm, but the rest of it was okay, but then he goes to Weston, and that's really like, 'why even bother to go through that year because he wasn't doing anything new.' Umm, so, I wasn't very happy with that, and it was very expensive.

Here in consecutive sentences, Reece talks about lack of relationships followed by an academic judgment, "kids not gonna be friendly at all" followed immediately by her feeling that Rob was "not learning anything."

*Trying relationships instead of control.* Reece tells me that the next year she home schooled Rob. That experience was "lonely" for her son. She explains to me that to belong to the local home schooling association, she would have had to sign a form saying that she was teaching her child "the lessons of God or something like that" which she refused to sign. As a result her son could not participate in the home school association's group activities but she describes this home schooling experience as a "good time." After six months, she felt it was too lonely for Rob and she applied for him to attend to the Friends School. There she said, "the kids welcomed him and were very friendly." She considered it "great" that Rob was doing a lot of writing, and the mathematics instruction was "not behind" as she had felt it was in the previous two schools. Again she positions relationships—this time friendliness right next to positive examples of his academic opportunities. She talks about the school's social curriculum emphasizing,

He's had a good time there. Umm, And he really enjoys the Quaker values. You know, umm, He likes the fact that umm, they are supposed to solve their conflicts non-violently. And I think he feels there's some amount of control there. So he doesn't feel like things are [pausing] I think that a lot of time in, in other classes

he's been worried that things will get out of control and he wouldn't know how to handle it and this I think he feels pretty comfortable with.

Reece's analysis of why her son likes the school is interesting in contrast with her earlier comment when she said that she had been unwilling to sign the home school association document affirming that she was teaching about "God." "Quaker values" become the framework for explaining her son's comfort at school. Notably this is the first time that she has expressed positive comments about Rob's education since moving from the Midwest.

Reece describes what she knows from her Midwest experience as "normal" or "regular" and in contrast describes the socialization practices of "silent lunch," limited access to lockers, students being punished in groups for misbehavior by a few, as "*so restrictive* [with emphasis] to try to maintain control"

"Normal" for Reece means that children demonstrate self management, or what Gutmann describes as the "morality of association" (1987, p. 62). Reece describes this when she says, "middle school where it would have been like a normal, you know, you finish your class, you go to the lunch room, you eat with whoever you like. You are responsible to go back to your next class." Until Rob attends the Friends school, her observations about his school experiences in this Southeast community are not normal, rather she describes each incidence of teachers' attempts to develop classroom and student control with alarm in her voice as she tells me what her children have told her about school.



“It’s not that hard” she tells me when she describes the Friends school practice of the students developing their own class rules and being trusted to follow them.

The consistency, they talk a lot about respecting other people and respecting their feelings, and respecting their property and I think they are very consistent. And I like that about the school, that was one of the things that I liked,

And it is also, when kids know what is expected, they also, you also are able to give them more freedom to do things because they know the rules and you can say, “okay, you know you can go get lunch and come back” and you can expect them to go get lunch and come back and not have any problems. You know, it’s not that hard.

Like Nel Noddings, Reece (2002) recommends trying relationships instead of control since obviously the control methods that she has encountered up until she sends Rob to the Friends School are not working.

***Tess’s Story: “It was a Real Happy Experience for Her”***

Tess’s story has similarities to Reece’s. Tess also represents an academic family but unlike Reece, Tess attended independent schools herself. She tells her daughter’s story in a chronological sequence beginning when Meg was an infant and like Reece, she shares her delight in each stage of her child’s development. “Exciting,” “amazing,” “that’s got to be the best” are interjected with descriptions of Meg’s emerging growth. Like Reece, Tess exudes with joy as she describes her child.

So I think in my mind I think of two things—her love of language, and her expertise at reading, and her love of words, and her sense of humor. So that’s kind of—I sort of feel like, Oh, my job is done. She’s a good reader, and she has a sense of humor—she’s pretty much equipped for life.

Tess describes Meg as living an “old fashioned life.” Words and phrases like “same group of friends pretty much all of her life,” “neighborhood” “close girl friends” “great friends in the neighborhood” portray strong and positive relationships to describe Meg’s childhood. As a preschooler she attended the university sponsored childcare program that Tess calls “nurturing” and says that Meg had a “really sweet time there.”

It was easy—and in that kind of open classroom situation she learned really early on—I think—the skills of—an open classroom, and how to behave, and chaos kind of around about—it seems like chaos—organized chaos—and to—to—find her own learning center. And—so she was pretty good at being able to focus and to stick to a point.

So she was—she was pretty good that way, and because we liked that open classroom with mixed ages and being able to kind of work at her own pace, and felt creative in programs, she went on to Eisenhower [an open format elementary school] which we were also lucky, there was a program like that. That was another really good part of her childhood, because she loved Eisenhower. We really loved Eisenhower. The open classroom was really a good thing for her.

And—it’s hard for us to kind of tell how much she—how much she learned from school and how much she just learned from her life, at her home, and her neighborhood, and there’s a mix, of course, with most kids. I don’t know really how strong she was academically, but she’s—we’re really proud of her—she had a great time, and she learned a lot there. And she learned a lot about people, and—it really centered her, so *it was a real happy experience for her.*

Tess’s absence of discussion of academic rigor and standards, her uncertainty about Meg’s academic strengths, her reflection about the breadth of what Meg was learning about life and people and her happiness, stand out in sharp contrast to her comments about Meg’s introduction to middle school at Samuelson.

***“It’s hard to pretend that it’s going to be okay. . . when it isn’t and you know it.”*** At Samuelson Middle School, Tess reports that Meg “was absolutely miserable.

She'd come home and fall apart." Now in the context of Meg's misery, Tess talks about academics and alludes to Meg's high academic abilities—even though she had been rather noncommittal about Meg's academic skills in the earlier school setting where Meg had been described as happy. Describing middle school, Tess says,

She still is doing well in school, but completely bored. And she still is reading voraciously, but she has out-read herself, she is reading—testing way beyond her class—grade level—you know, her father would say things like, “can you believe you've read more than this person in college?” and that sort of thing, and so I think that was kind of setting her up for more frustration, because she knew she wasn't quite fitting the image she needed to—and you know, middle school's a rough age, and the other kids were going away to other schools, and—so those were—those were kind of her peers—which kind of brings us around to the beginning of the eighth grade.

So she was at Samuelson for sixth and seventh, so that it was just kind of a given that she would finish up at Samuelson even though she was miserable. I was—internally just going crazy for her because she was really unhappy.

*It's hard to pretend that it's going to be okay sometimes when it's really—it's not going to be—and you know [it].* Fortunately, we were able to send her to Friends School, but it's been a stretch financially of course. It's not that we can just say “Oh, we're going to go there.”

But I grew up in a household my parents couldn't really afford to send me to all this, to private school, but it was such a priority for them that they made it happen. And that to me was something that stuck with me all of my life, that they sent me for all the right reasons, because they were not trying to avoid integration, they worked for integration.

So it wasn't that I was trying to be separated from the race things that were going on back in the 60's. They were liberal but they wanted the best education for me because that was just such a priority to them. And so I was happy that I was given that opportunity, but it was certainly not just a given that I was going to be able to go to private school. They sacrificed lots of other things, and the new cars every year, new houses, and all that other kind of thing.

Describing Meg's eighth grade year after she switched to the Friends school she tells me, "You know, in terms of how it's been, it's just been sort of life-changing." Tess gives examples of what life changing can mean for a middle school student. The first example is Meg's experience wearing her special red high top tennis shoes to Samuelson contrasted with her experience of wearing those shoes on her first day at the Friends School.

[At Samuelson] she just got ribbed up and down the halls. She got ribbed by white kids. She got ribbed by black kids for not wearing them a certain way. It was a really tough day for her. . . . But then she went to Friends School soon after that, and everybody at Friends School, like the first day said, "Cool shoes." So that was great for her. *It was sort of you know, the beginning of a great relationship.*

A second example is Tess's version of the school's custom of classes going on overnight trips in the early weeks of school to foster group bonding and leadership development.

It was perfect timing, because it was sort of their 'get to know each other' camping trip, and so she was there for that, and meanwhile we were a little nervous about how this would all go, and I was afraid for her, but—to have to go right at the beginning—she came back and she was just so happy.

She had, you know, a great time. One night out in a field where they would all lie down on the grass looking at the stars, and asked to share their thoughts, and she was just amazed at how she was so embraced from the very beginning and part of being at school for them was to let her—express herself. Gosh. It's just amazing.

There've been several incidents like that. . . . On Fridays they have their service days. They were working on a little nature preserve . . . and they had been allowed to run through this field that had a lot of milkweed, and some kind of plant, and it was late afternoon, and she remembers running through this field with some of her new friends, and the milkweed kind of blowing—and you know.

So it's things like that that have really made her happy about the change. And academically she's—feels like she's been more challenged, without being overly burdened. So this year's really been kind of a gift for her, I think. It's—it's just—perfect—lifting her spirits. And it's renewed her academic spirits, too.

As she describes Meg I see a smiling youthful happy face. Again Tess positions happiness with a positive comment about academics.

It is at the very end of the interview that Tess asks me if I am a Quaker. “No,” I tell her, but explain that I had taught at the local Friends college and that my own children had all attended Friends colleges. She asks me what colleges are Quaker, and the interview emerges into a conversation but then Tess becomes reflective as she shares her thoughts about the importance of Friends values that have become more clear as a result of Meg's experience this year at the Friends school. Friends believe that truth is continuously emerging. “If there is that of God in every person, then truth is the best that there is in each of us – the part of us that is naturally drawn toward the good, toward God” (Smith, 2002, p. 32).

***A safe place for “far out” ideas like truth.***

This is kind of—it's sort of a revelation, but it's kind of seeing, maybe, that she might find validation for the—some of the values that she had at home, which were largely social values—and democratic—not in a political, not in a party sense, democratic in democracy. And that she knew that there were social concerns that she had about everything from a quality girl power, black power, people power, that she couldn't express or was not—she wasn't accepted at public schools because she had or was perceived to be kind of ‘far out’—sort of—ideas.

They're not that far out, they're just – it's just that she hadn't found a group that had those priorities, *so I think that was kind of the revelation, when she found at Friends School that those are the priorities, no question.* And as a parent, I have to say I'm very pleased. It's very powerful for her, too . . . For me to see her have

that revelation—was a—to feel like “oh, yeah, it’s okay, this is how it’s—*it’s okay for me to believe in those things.*”

Given that Tess has only been at the school during current school year, I find myself asking Tess, “How do you think, given that she’s not been there very long, how do you think that is transmitted or how do you know that, that that’s what she’s gotten out of this?”

I think because it’s such a natural extension of who she already was . . . . Because of who her parents are and who her friends have been, that she’s always lived in a way a kind of Quaker life—in lots of aspects, different ways—and certainly the emphasis on social issues and some of the Quaker concerns and priorities were already sort of—I think that she was being pushed by society in a different route, kind of, and it wasn’t the way that she wanted to go—and I think that the way she found that it was kind of a fit for her—it kind of—it just fell into place.

Friends believe in “inner light of truth” in each individual. Although it’s there, we must turn toward this light and acknowledge its power to illuminate our path” (Smith, 2002, p. 47). Though Tess uses different words, what I feel she is saying is that in this setting at Friends School, that inner goodness, inner light, or “God within” has had a chance to emerge. Another way of describing this revelation, is to say that once Meg was outside the setting where hegemonic ideologies dominated, “pushed by society” are the words Tess uses, Meg was able to express and act on her own truths. Tess describes her child as happy. There is no talk now about lack of academic challenge or about being bored, or frustration with school. “It kind of just fell into place.”

## CHAPTER VI

### SOME PEOPLE ARE REALLY QUAKERS, SOME JUST DON'T KNOW IT

When writing about parents choosing independent education, I find myself in the middle of two very different and competing views of the outcome of independent education. On the one hand there is the world of personal advantage focusing on the future, a view of “excellence” described by Alan Peshkin (2001) in his book, Permissible Advantage: Moral Consequences of Elite Schooling. Peshkin quotes a student who retells a conversation with his parent:

We are sending you to the Academy [his father told him] because it is a safe environment. We don't have to worry about gangs or shootings or any of what you consider harassment. I asked my Dad “Wasn't that kind of a little too sheltered a little too separate from the outside world, kind of elite?” He said, “That is what we are paying for. We are paying for you to be around other smart kids, paying for great futures.” (Peshkin, 2001, p. xii)

On the other hand there is another articulated educational priority where “excellence” is defined in terms of honoring the uniqueness of the individual and valuing the importance of relationships of the present that is more closely aligned with the ideas of John Dewey, where education is a “social process” and community life, is the underlying aim of education (Dewey, 1998, p. 224).

Making this kind of choice of independent education, Peshkin believes has implications both “internally to the school's promise of opportunity to its students and externally when these promises are viewed in the context of schooling for all American

children” (2001, p. xii). With Peshkin’s example, he identifies the opposing tension, a real dilemma for many parents who either are Quakers, or who share Friends priorities. The “educational injustice” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 51) that is implied by the very existence of independent education, and the choice to attend, is a core concern for some of those who also espouse Quaker beliefs.

“Awkwardness, embarrassment, even guilt” are the words Peshkin (2001, p. 95) uses to describe the sentiments expressed by teachers and some students at the elite Edgeworth Academy, when he talked with them about the issues of “privilege” for both those who are admitted and attending and many who are teachers at Edgeworth.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately the core issue of elite education, that can also be asked about other independent schools is, are we talking about personal advantage resulting from educational excellence where “best” or better than others is the measure, or do some independent schools provide a setting where the values of justice and concern for the common good define excellence.

As the Co-Head of the Friends school says, “Some people are really Quakers, some just don’t know it.” For some this surfaces in stories of unresolved conflict of participation in a system that provides individual privilege but that also affirms the testimonies of peace, equality, community, simplicity and integrity. For some the issues of privilege and guilt are a trade off for an educational option that also supports their

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the school described by Peshkin (2001, p. 95) that is “elite” in part because of the competitiveness to be admitted, the particular school in this study, in my opinion does not suffer from this basis of elitism. Being admitted is not based on competitive tests or a scarcity of spaces for which one is fortunate to be selected as Peshkin describes. Therefore, “chosenness” as described by Peshkin (2001, p. 95) is not part of the cultural norm at this Friends school and is not a pattern of conversation.



priority that their children be in an environment where equality—in the broadest sense of what that means—is practiced.

### **Social Justice: Privilege and Guilt**

The core beliefs of Quakers are simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. I often find myself saying that these testimonies represent through the use of religious language, the secular beliefs of social justice and democracy. Therefore, the question must be raised, how can parents believe in both a social justice agenda whether they use religious language or not, and also send their children to an independent school, granted a Friends independent school? Peshkin (2001) believes that “schools are about more than just what goes on in them; they mirror what is and is not at stake for their particular constituents. They function similarly for the nation” (p. xii).

I propose that some schools can, and perhaps more could, “mirror what is at stake” but reflect not an elitism and educational program to promote self advantage, but mirror a reflection of social justice, which, I believe is increasingly less possible in public schools where testing “the distillation of education into product rather than process, and neatly represented in the rigid concreteness and seeming infallibility of numbers—now dominates the dialog about schooling in American” (Shaw, 2001, p. 68).

The mere existence of particular types of schools . . . indicate moral choices that some American subgroup has made and, moreover, that American society has made about legally acceptable ways to educate American children. . . . A school’s moral choices originate in and are enacted by the ongoing action of its local clientele and community. (Peshkin, 2001, p. 5)

I believe that there can be moral choices that reflect a social justice agenda and that these choices exist and are maintained because of a particular clientele and community. That clientele can be identified by how people talk about their own children and others, and what people talk about. But it is not always an easy choice for all that make it.

***Helene's Story: "We Chose it so He'd Feel Good about Himself in School"***

Helene never uses the Friends' wording to describe her belief in "that of God" or "inner goodness" within each person—but I believe that her description of her son and her goals for him reflect that priority. Helene begins her story with the words, describing her son's kindergarten year as "a big defining year for us, because . . . you know, everyone just about pays for private preschool, but then you have to make a decision when they're going on . . ."

Identifying herself as a Quaker, Helene begins her story by explaining her rationale for attending the school during her son's preschool years, but then having to justify her decision to continue sending him to the Friends school when he was old enough to go to public school. "With what's happening in the public schools" she begins her comparison of "apples and oranges" including comparisons of teacher-student ratios and class size. Her perception of public school use of paper and pencil activities that she describes as "busy work" is contrasted with what she calls "meaningful structure" including journal writing, integrated experiences, and a description of school that she says is exciting and motivating to her son.

“They asked us ‘what is your goal for your child?’ and for us it was that he would leave kindergarten feeling like he was a successful learner and feel good about himself. We feel like we have accomplished that.” She describes her son’s analytical abilities in mathematics as “gift” “that they [teachers at the school] are able to accommodate.” In less than 1000 words, Helene has made the comparison of public and independent schooling and laid out her goals for her child and described her son in terms understood by Friends, using the word “gift” to describe his strengths in mathematics. She believes that Aaron’s inner goodness, his unique gifts, his sense of who he is, has been acknowledged and had the opportunity to flourish.

Explaining that her two younger children will be attending the school the next year, she adds,

It’s a huge financial strain. . . . I’m sure we’ll evaluate it every year because we think of all the opportunities outside of school that we have to forgo to send them here. . . . I don’t know what everybody’s situation is, but we even qualified for financial assistance this year, for next year, and my husband makes a lot of money. I can’t imagine how much money you need to comfortably send your kids here. . . . It just isn’t possible for most people to do this for their kids.

Acknowledging the costs, and admitting attending the school “just isn’t possible for most people” Helene adds, “there just isn’t enough diversity here, . . . as I’m sure the school would like.” For Helene diversity is “reaching from all socio-economic levels, more than like a racial kind of diversity.” She describes the students of color who attend the school saying,

A lot of them are adopted, so they're still sort of in the culture, that they're being raised [that] isn't matching their skin tone necessarily. . . . I have observed that they have been able to have a lot of kids with special needs here, that can get their needs met without that necessarily impacting on other students in the class. So that's a good thing too, but again to me that all boils down to numbers and the quality of staff.

Helene seems rushed as she talks with me and also is talking quietly to her younger boys who have accompanied her for the interview. Still dressed in her painting clothes with splatters of white paint on her hands and jeans, she has interrupted a project at her house to meet me. Her younger children are playing quietly on the playground with sand toys that she's brought along. Nearby a class is practicing their speeches for graduation using the platform of the wooden playground structure as their rehearsal stage. When the classroom teacher asks her boys to not play near the students she explains her interest in the older students. She softly calls her boys over asking them to talk in whispers and she tells her sons that the older students are practicing their graduation speeches.

Her oldest son, completing his kindergarten year, will be giving one of the eighth graders a flower in the school's traditional farewell graduation ceremony she explains. As she talks with her children, I keep thinking of how everything she says and how she says it is a model for her own children of how one conducts themselves with respect for others. Telling me why she selected the school she explains,

I liked how they focus on social skills and social interaction. . . . I felt like some people are sort of turned off by that, they want them to learn their letters and colors. . . .It was okay with me to work with those things with him at home to get him ready and to have that [social skills] be the focus in this preschool.

Helene spends more time talking with me about the older students than her own children. The upcoming graduation celebration with student speeches is important to her. Notably while she talks about her son's enthusiasm for learning, she does not talk about specific academic achievements. For her socialization is an important function of schooling. As she describes the older students' upcoming graduation, she elaborates on the upcoming graduating students' speeches. "They all have to write a speech about their experiences here and how it shaped their lives in a meeting for worship and so that's what they're practicing. I can't wait to hear what they have to say about their years here."

***Meeting needs before you fail.*** It is only after asking her for at least a third time if she has anything to add about the story of her son's life that she concludes her comments and then abruptly in the next sentence she expands her story to include details previously not mentioned, that give another context for Aaron's life story:

We had, he had a tough birth and had some oxygen deprivation and I've been watching that kid ever since to make sure everything is going to be okay and maybe I've paid more attention to him than usual.

My professional background is in special education so I'm, you know, I am clued into those warning signs, and I've seen many of them, many of them in Aaron, and at the same time I'm fully aware they only become issues when you reach a developmental stage that is what's beyond average or beyond the normal range. But also feel like when you wait and you don't address the problem until you know statistically it is okay, you have missed a whole opportunity to be remediating and working on alternative learning styles and everything else.

And a child sits like the child in the public schools with a system for delivering special ed. services, they have to fail before they qualify you know. *You have to experience that failure before they can get help. . .*

Each teacher's ability to accommodate a child, ability to modify for a child and *just plain tolerance for children who learn differently, definitely impacts how they see that child and how they view their disabilities . . .*

Because I've sort of had this perspective, I've been trying to provide an environment for Aaron that will allow for him to learn the way he needs to learn without feeling like he's not good at this. . . . I felt like that could be accomplished here and I wasn't sure that was going to be accomplished in public school. . . . Michael [another son] could have gone to school anywhere. He'd be fine, but if you send the one to this school, why shouldn't the other one go?

### **Equality and Community**

Nila, Sue, and Charles are parents whose stories about their sons are remarkably similar. All describe their children using words that show acceptance of who the child is and an expectation of acceptance of their children as each child is. All comment about testing in public schools and reflect on their fears for their children if they are subjected to standardized testing in the public schools. Sue and Charles identify themselves as Quakers. Sue and Nila are both professional educators with a background in Montessori teaching methods. They talk about how their sons learn differently, but they do not talk about these differences from a perspective of their children being deficient. Instead they talk about learning strategies that have helped their children be successful in school.

Success is never mentioned in terms of "best" or "better than" but rather in terms of enjoyment of the learning process. "Feeling good about himself, feeling like a successful learner" were the words Helene used. Nila, Sue, and Charles use similar words to describe their sons' school experiences and they all talk about similar topics; public school testing practices, school as a nurturing place, celebration of their child's unique gifts, and a preference for a consistent and grounded philosophy of education.

Standardized testing however, is the recurring theme that dominates their three stories. Summarizing their views on testing, I draw the conclusion that they would all

agree that testing does not contribute to educational justice for their children or other people's children. As a practice, testing does not contribute to the Friends testimony of equality. Testing does not support the belief that "there is that of God" or "inner light" within everyone, and testing does not celebrate the gifts that these parents describe in their children because standardized tests do not test for kindness, good humor, peace-making relationships, or any of the other gifts these parents value and attribute to their children. Finally, testing does not contribute to school being a nurturing place for children. Though Sue and Charles are Quakers and Nila is not, as the co-head of school says, "some people are really Quakers, some just don't know it."

***Nila's Story: Testing, the Straw that Breaks the Camel's Back***

Nila talks about how Trey learns "differently" and she shares her concerns about his learning style but interjects frequently, "that's how he is." She says she feels that the current testing practices within the public schools might label or hinder him. As a former public school teacher she tells me that she has administered standardized tests and she expresses strong concerns about this practice. School for Nila is a place where children should be loved and nurtured. Testing, in her experience as a teacher, is neither loving nor nurturing of children.

I was very unhappy with the testing and that was a big part of why I left public [school teaching]. I just think it is cruel the way they do it at this point. I don't mean we should have standards cause you should. . . . I've seen lots of children who that [testing] does nothing for them. They're either too far advanced or never going to make the cut.

Nila tells me that Trey attended highly rated day care centers as an infant, and from the time he was very young, she was aware of his unique learning style. “He would lay the puzzle out, but couldn’t make them go so,” she pauses, and continues, “we had him tested and they said to wait until he was older.” Because of her training as a Montessori teacher, that style of education was her first preference. However, due to some administrative mix ups, she applied at the Friend’s Early School and was accepted. “We just loved it.”

Nila describes Trey as “very social and so from the get go it was keeping him out. At one and a half he would go to the door and knock on the door and say, ‘go, go’ if we stayed home very long. He’s just a very confident child.”

Already I have a sense of who Trey is, and though she has described examples of how he learns differently, my image of Trey is a happy outgoing child and differences whatever they might be are at most slight shadows behind this boy who is described in loving and positive terms. Examples of how he learns differently are often interspersed with her comment, “I don’t know why” and followed frequently by, “that’s how he is.” His differences impact on her choice of independent education for Trey.

I had taught in public, and there’s a lot of great things going on in public education, phenomenal things, but testing, ahh, to me it seems inappropriate. I’ve never given children a test and been proud afterwards, not because the children had done. . . . But I was worried that they didn’t know what to do. It, it’s just too long, a lot of questions that are not developmentally appropriate. You give them to a third grader. . . . *We wanted Trey in a place where he could be nurtured and not shuffled through.* And he learns differently. He never does things in the right order.



Nila gives me several examples of how Trey does things in a sequence that seem different while also sharing within those stories examples of Trey's sense of humor.

It's like you don't think he's ever going to move along and all of a sudden he jumps five levels. . . . That was another reason I wanted a more nurturing place. I mean a lot of times I notice in public schools, from one class to the next cause there's not a philosophy at the school. One teacher can be so different from the next. And it's not personality wise; it's just the way they teach. And in private [schools] there's usually a philosophy of teaching or a certain way they like things done.

Nila gives several examples of working with Trey to achieve certain skills, like learning the alphabet or transitioning to chapter books, but her intervention is never described in terms of Trey being deficient. His academic progress is noted, but it is with a smile and a laugh that she gives another example, "So all I did was go home and say, 'Why don't you, this is, look at this, I think you'll like this,' and of course he went up two or three levels in a month's time." As a teacher who is familiar with sequences in learning, and has a sense of grade and age norms, she says she is both "frazzled" and accepting when she sees discrepancies between norms and Trey's performance.

It frazzles me, because education is very, very important. It really drives me crazy. . . . You know, *he's just that way*. . . . I'm just going to have to stay very well aware all the time. He's eight, big, tall and has lots of friends and is very happy most of the time. We've been happy about our choice. Friends School is his home. We could pitch a tent and pick him up at the end of eighth grade and he'd be fine.

Trey is funny and he loves people and Friends School has a big social curriculum. In some ways he didn't need that because even at three he was past parallel play. He was so ready to interact so he likes the older children. And so in the combination classes they have there for him, you know one year he's the teacher, but the next year he really is like the older children.

Again she tells me a story about Trey's unique way of being. The story is about him giving away his trading cards to another child who did not have any. As she talks I feel a celebration of Trey's gifts particularly his gift of social relationships.

Little boys are really into them. You play a game with them and certain ones can beat others. I don't understand all that, oh well, socially, I don't know why. It is just an innate part of him. Well I'm sure he learned it. *It is just part of who he is.* I am in my thirties and I'm still trying to figure out to work all the social arena, but he's just always done very well in that arena. I don't know why.

Nila tells me that she and her husband made the decision to have their child attend independent schools when she was pregnant and working in public education. Again testing is a major part of her story and her decision to send Trey to the Friends school.

It seems like there was so many issues in schools. At that point all we knew was what we heard cause we had both been out of school for a while. The testing was probably pretty much just the last straw. Watching and I've given every test you can give in elementary as a teacher from second to fifth, from IQ to EOG, to anything, . . . it was watching the kids whose stomachs hurt and all that.

***A nurturing environment and grounded philosophy.*** Nila talks about why she selected independent education, "Part of it was being protective. . . My husband I both went to public so it wasn't, that wasn't an issue. We like the smaller classes, two teachers between twenty-two kids.

We had looked at every school in town. . . . We were looking for a learning environment. I taught at Picket and there were eight different teachers on a grade level. One very traditional, one very developmental, one just got a job, and thing is, it's just luck of the draw with your child who they get. . . .

At Friends School and at Montessori, there's a philosophy; a way of teaching and those things stay the same no matter which teachers come in and out. . . .And

that's another thing I liked about the private route versus the public route, and just a lot, that teachers don't have enough control in the classrooms and you have a lot of mainstreaming from private to public, but in private eventually if there is a line that needs to be drawn it can be drawn. . . .

Just being in the other system [public system] didn't help the case one way or the other. Cause like I said, there's lots of great things going on, things that they are trying, but they're still so many things that are wrong. . . . I had, I think eleven children who had learning disabilities, one who had cerebral palsy and twenty out of twenty-six were ESL [English as a second language].

That was really hard to decide, to decide to turn my child who has some learning difference, who's always going to have to make that mark and I don't know that Trey would do well on the test. . . . One day, yes, he might do really well and the next day. . .

I didn't want Trey's confidence to be stifled by one day, you know for, by one day reading test, or one day math test for, you know from the get go. Now I'm a good test taker, so that for me would be no problem. But my son is different. He hasn't had to do any of those tests and I just couldn't imagine that he would always get what he could do every time, just like most children.

Nila reflects on her younger siblings' experiences in public education.

There were lots of discipline issues and you know just lot of things. . . particularly in the middle and high schools that were sort of scary to think about putting your child in. . . . We wanted something that would fit for him instead of just saying, "well whatever happens, happens."

It is only near the end of her story that Nila tells me that Trey was premature by one month. "We looked for delays. . . . I think I was too nervous to trust, 'cause when he was little, because he was so kind we were scared to throw him in that arena that we weren't really sure."

Unlike Terry who makes assumptions about other people's children and who has told me that "white bullying" is more acceptable than bullying that is physical, Nila says,

Really private kids aren't any better than public, but the parents usually are making a choice. . . . Then again it doesn't mean it's the most disciplined or the most anything, but somehow that plays a part in that community. Friends School is very much a community. . . I don't walk on campus where ten people are not saying, "Hi Nila." Now I may not know who they are, but I wanted that for Trey.

Nila continuously talks about Trey as a kind child. She readily talks about how he learns differently but never as though it makes him deficient or "bad."

He doesn't have to be an "A" student, but we want him to be able to grow and we didn't want him in a place where three days of testing are gonna' say that you were good or bad. We wanted somewhere that if he was good at math, not so good at reading, that could be, so it's not, "but you've still got to make that 3" [referring to public school measures for acceptable progress.]

In contrast to Terry, whose story acknowledges an unresolved conflict about the educational choice she has made for her own career and the choice made for her children, Nila talks about making a personal career choice that is consistent with the choices she has made for her own child. She tells about giving notice on her public school job when she decided to teach in a non-public kindergarten program where I meet her for the interview.

Here I can teach the way I want to teach. I don't have a principal coming in and say, "It's ten o one, you're supposed to be teaching math now." You know a lot of principals I worked with didn't understand integrated studies and a lot of developmentally appropriate things. I had one say; "You better not teach punctuation and grammar because I don't care if these kids don't know English, that's not on the writing test."

Nila is now banging her hand on the table to make a point for each example of what she has heard principals say.

There were lots of things I saw, and I'm advocate for children, so it was extremely hard for me. I had a principal one time tell me that a child couldn't see the guidance counselor even though she had cerebral palsy and was peeing all over herself all the time, because she was losing instructional time.

When an opportunity opened to teach in the independent kindergarten Nila explains that she submitted her resignation for the public school position that she held, prepared for teaching that class until a replacement was found, forfeited a down payment for a new home she had planned to build, and accepted the new job because as she said,

I wanted to be in a place where children come first. . . There were lots of things I saw [in public schools]. I'm an advocate for children so it was extremely hard for me. . . And even the principals who weren't that way, the testing all that pressure is still there.

***Sue and Charles' Stories: "It's a Unique Opportunity that You Would Only Get in a Little School."***

Both Sue and Charles, parents of Thad, participated in the project and were interviewed individually. Their stories and priorities have a remarkable similarity. Both describe Thad as tender hearted, a sweet boy, and he's always had friends, no problem making friends and he's fun to be with. He is described as having a particularly close relationship to his Dad and the family does lots of things as a family including regularly eating meals together and attending Quaker meeting where "he is definitely an integral part of the real meeting, not just the kids' [programs] He said some wonderful spiritual things. So he has a strong sense of the spirit."

*“Because we’re Quaker.”* Respect of Thad as an individual, who he uniquely is, his gifts, or more broadly “equality” and value of school as a nurturing learning community are the major themes of their stories. “Little school,” “Friends school” are words that are frequently used when describing examples of what they call “opportunities” for Thad as a student at Friends school. “Teachers would give you the freedom to decide . . .” “Teachers created the atmosphere, they created the opportunity, he took advantage of it, and it made a big difference” are phrases used to describe equality and community as experienced by their son.

Thad started school in a Montessori style school when he was three years old, then transferred to a public school when the family moved to another region. “He had a little bit of trouble learning letters and numbers, symbol recognition,” Sue reports, so the family discussed with the new school system having him enter kindergarten as a six year old.

The school system said we’ll put him in first grade and so we did, but that was a mistake. I mean he was fine in first grade, but that was a mistake. He started having some trouble in second grade and they gave him a reading specialist which, and ever since then we’ve never had any problems with reading.

*We got really fed up with the whole teaching to the test stuff.* Aaron had passed all the tests for third, fourth grade which included that writing test they do which was just horrendous, a ridiculous test for a fourth grader. We could see how they were teaching to the test, writing every day at school. Every night he’d have to write and they weren’t doing any revision. It was just writing and then writing again. That’s not what good writing is about. That’s when we said the public schools here were awful. Because we’re Quakers we looked at Friends School so that’s why he’s at Friends School now.

***Equality and honoring individual gifts.*** As Sue describes how Thad learns, she seems relatively unconcerned about specific academic weaknesses. Sue explains her position on mathematics, which is not unlike Nel Nodding's position on the relative unimportance of every child needing to be proficient in mathematics. "Why [do we decide] that the road to equality is established by coercing everyone into become proficient in mathematics?" Nodding asks, (2003, p. 88). Sue has already resolved that question by the educational choice she has made for Thad and how she responds.

Another thing that's probably going to be a little different with him. All of my boys struggled a little bit in middle school. Maybe all kids do. And I think part of this is being an older and more experienced parent for me that you know, if you don't do well in math, the math teacher seems to be incensed about it, but so what? Some day he's going to get past the age where somebody asks him to do this stuff and it won't matter any more. *He can have a perfectly adequate, happy adult life without being able to do math. So I'm just willing to accept that. He can be just who he is. He doesn't have to be what the school says he has to be.*

Reflecting on Sue's words, I can hear Nel Noddings clapping loudly in my mind—but it is a rare example to hear a parent talk like this and mean it. The impact of Sue's words are even more significant given that she impresses me as being a very soft spoken, somewhat shy woman. Though Sue does not talk about equality, as does Noddings (2003), her actions and beliefs support that Friends testimony. Equality means acceptance of her son as he is. It means honoring his gifts as they are without creating deficiencies out of what he is not. Even when they made the decision for him to repeat sixth grade, it was from a position of acceptance of Thad and acknowledgement of their own mistakes as parents, not Thad's deficiencies.

It is a tough time and a tough decision; I mean, Charles and I immediately said, “Ya, I think you are right we should hold him back.” But it was tough to get past him. . . . We took him to a psychologist over the summer. He was also getting bullied at the Friends School. They had a couple of bullies in that class.

I think one of the reasons they put him in fifth grade [when he was admitted to the school] was because there was another little boy who was being bullied and he really wasn’t making friends but when Thad visited they really connected and were friendly, and they thought “Oh great, a friend for him, so we’ll put Thad in his class so they could be friends.” And they were, but as a result that kid was being bullied when Thad got into that class.

We were pretty unhappy with Friends School about the way they dealt with it. They kept wanting to deal with bullies and help them not be bullies but in the meantime we felt Thad was continuing to be bullied and that they weren’t stopping that. So that was kind of an altercation between us and the school about that.

Holding him back helped because the bullies went on. The psychologist helped him a lot. She talked to him. His favorite phrase coming out of that was, “competence and confidence.” She wanted him to feel competent and confident. That was really the goal for staying back a grade.

He was just a little bit ahead of himself, and that wasn’t his fault, it was our fault, for placing him in the class that we did and the school’s fault. The adults took the blame for that. Anyway, she was great and she helped him a lot.

One of the upshots of that was at the beginning of the school year they always have the kids do a project before school starts and bring it to share with the class. This year the project was about a time you felt different. He made a poster about staying in the sixth grade and about not feeling comfortable the year before. He found a picture of him playing basketball with the other kids and he’s the shortest in the class, although now he’s not the shortest. So that’s helpful too. I forget what all he put on the poster.

So on the first day of school they go out to a little camp for a retreat, and he volunteered to go I think second and presented this to the class that he was staying in sixth grade and all the reasons why. I thought it was incredibly brave of him to do it at all, and then to volunteer to be practically first. And then when we picked him up, he came running out to the car, “Mom, nobody cares, everybody thinks it’s great.”

He was so worried that people would tease him about it. Of course they didn’t, they just accepted it. Plus he had two friends in that class from the year before. So



now he was with his best friends really instead of going on with the bullies. So it was wonderful and it's been wonderful. He's doing really well in school.

*Drilling and testing.* As it is for Sue, the state mandated testing is also a major focus of concern for Charles. He describes his son, Thad who as a young child needed a very nurturing, safe environment, who “wasn’t strongly independent” . . . “a home, family-oriented sort of little kid.” When Thad was three years old he started school at a Montessori school that “nurtured his particular needs in terms of social needs and being able to do what he needed to do at a particular time.” Clearly, Thad’s readiness and not an external mandated decree of readiness, is the basis on which the family values education. Yet as the story evolves, both Sue and Charles’ version, they acknowledge that they “made a mistake” in class placement for Thad, not once, not twice, but three times.

We really should have put him in kindergarten, although he was technically old enough to be in first grade. His developmental stage and school abilities said he needed a little more time, because he was right on the edge . . . he was going to be the youngest kid in the class, . . . as well as being a boy, . . . He needed a little extra time to boot, . . . but we made the mistake and put him in first grade. He had a teacher who was very nice, and he had some friends in the class, but it was always a struggle in different subjects.

Explaining that the family moved after Thad’s third grade year, Charles says,

We made the same mistake again. We had the opportunity for him to do third grade again . . . everything would have been just fine if he’d done third grade again, but we put him in fourth grade and he struggled.

Then one of the big things that happened was the State of North Carolina . . . started to have this end-of-grade test nonsense. And the result of doing that was that they didn’t teach school any more. They prepared for the tests. School was boring. It was repetitive. It was drill. It just wasn’t school any more. We thought we got to get him out of [this]. Some kids might do okay with this, but Thad’s not

going to do okay with this. He's not going to learn anything because all they're going to do is drilling.

At this point Charles explains he and Sue started talking to the Friends school. "This was not an elite school. This is not the school that is bent on getting their kids along the road to going to Harvard and Yale. This is a school for every kid and that was very attractive." But again, Charles said, they "made a mistake" in that instead of having Thad repeat the fourth grade they placed him in the fifth grade for the following fall. Finally in sixth grade Thad's teachers recommended that Thad stay an extra year in sixth grade and Sue and Charles agreed. As he tells the story, it is with a sense of relief and joy that finally they had a chance to rectify a decision that they feel they had made three times before.

We all agreed. But it was that kind of recognition that we knew was going to happen here *because they have some good Quaker atmosphere, installation of Quaker values*. They go to meeting. There'd be plenty of talk about the issues that are important to Quakers, . . . and they see each kid individually and look at that kid's needs and how they're going to address that need even if it is difficult, seemed to be important and they did.

They [teachers] took the lead and then he did sixth grade again, and it's just been a world of differences. He has grown and learned and we found out he's just where he needs to be with the right age kids.

Charles explains that the choice to send Thad to an independent school has been "a stretch so we drive older cars and do not take vacations. But it's worth every penny by having him in a good school, in a good environment." Charles describes atmosphere in terms of "more like being a family than an impersonal school, smaller classrooms, two full teachers, not a teacher and an assistant." Charles tells the same story that Sue has

shared about Thad making the decision to share his decision to stay in sixth grade with his classmates. "He started to take ownership of it" explains Charles as he tells me how proud he was of Thad and how proud Thad was of himself. "He did it. We didn't do it. The teacher's didn't do it. He did it."

*Academics shaped by relationships.* Charles says that Thad's interest in writing developed in part because of his expectation that "there would be a large amount of encouragement to be independent and to be creative and the time and space to do that." Describing the school's practice of collaborative writing and editing, he compares Thad's recent writing project, a thirty page story that he has still not completed, but that has been "fed by the enthusiasm of his friends."

Charles' comments about writing just add to Sue's comments about Thad's public school writing assignments where writing assignments were about "teaching to the test. Writing every day at school . . . and they weren't doing any revision." . . . "We all know that real writing is rewriting, and they never got a chance to rewrite something."

Charles elaborates on a recent experience describing the importance of relationships within the classroom and how this value of community is impacting on his son's development of writing skills. He tells about Thad's recent writing project:

The story becomes part of his life—it's just something he's thinking about week after week, and developing and that's something that only an independent school can do, because you have the latitude, you have the space, because you have the inclination and the class size, and you have the assignment to do that kind of personal, individual development.

And not just between the teacher and the student, but the kids get together to write together and share stories, and when you share a story with the whole class, or you have just kind of a committee of four or five kids sitting together, but they

talk about you know, “Why’d you write it this way?” Or “Maybe you could have written it this way” or “Why don’t you write it that way” and they learn from their peers in a way that they couldn’t possibly learn from an adult.

And the kids are encouraging. “I like this part.” . . . “I think you ought to expand on that idea.” They do it for each other. So it’s peer counseling. I like that. Thad has an opportunity to tell another kid in that group how he feels about that story, and they all take notes furiously, and come home and do it.

In his own words Charles is talking about “connectedness” as described by Parker Palmer (1993) where learning is multidirectional and interconnected. Learning reflects experiences that come from community and intentionally developed relationships, “that will inevitably alter us” (p. 54).

***Renee’s Story: This is a Nice Community***

Renee begins her story with a description of her children. Within the opening minutes she has alluded to her family’s priorities (simple living), economic status (upper middle class if not upper class) and tied her values to her choice of education for her children.

They’re just great, nice children, very caring people. . . . They don’t really have to worry about too much. Our family has enough money to take care of them and to send them to good schools. . . . We also live a very modest life in a very tiny house.

This is a nice community. We appreciate how much there is a social curriculum and a commitment to raising children of conscience. I think that’s really important. I think it does take more than parents to raise children who have that kind of conscience. *It’s a collective experience* and that was one of the concerns we had about public school.

Renee briefly mentions “learning challenges” of one of her daughters.

We wanted her to be in a school where she was not made to feel different and that was a concern of mine that if she went to public school how she would be treated differently or someone would call her dumb. . . . She's done extremely well here.

For Renee, doing well in school is described as,

She's a happy kid, and her teachers have really supported her strengths instead of focusing on her weakness. And we like the school because there's just a lot of creativity. You know all children don't learn by, you know, reading things off a chalkboard.

I think every parent thinks that their child is going to grow up to be something special. I've always had a sense that ever since my children came into the world that they would. There's some reverence around them that they are very special. . . . It's hard to describe. . . . a more spiritual thing. They've been surrounded by people who have really loved them and I think it shows. . .

Like Vic whose story follows, Renee describes her goals for her children in terms of values, not professional or academic achievements.

I really believe that this school—although I think our parenting, too, and the belief, the beliefs that we have at home—have contributed to her development as a human being—the school has nurtured, really nurtured that soul. That soul of hers, whatever, the spirit of hers, that is coming through. . . .

I don't know what my children will end up doing in their lives. I have no expectations of them professionally or otherwise—there are certain values that I want them to have. . . . Among them is courage and self-sufficiency, with an interdependent system, responsibility.

I want them to be generous. . . . I want them to understand that with money comes responsibility around that and it's real important to us. It's a core value. But again, that's another thing that I liked about the school—there's people here with some of them are with money, and some are not, and you can't really tell the difference. I like that.

We're not struggling day to day financially—although we do have financial issues because of the enterprise that we're in (expanding a family business) but, you know, the girls are not wanting of anything. That's not to say that they're

materialistic. They have what they need in life, but they don't have a lot. There's just not that much in life that we really, really need, other than, I guess, family.

I think there's a lot of respect at home. They have a lot of respect for me, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for them. . . . I'm hoping that they're also growing up in a house where they can share. And they do. They share a lot of their lives, and we set it up that way. At dinner every night, it's kind of like we do rounds, and I started that a while ago. We just light a candle, and we'd talk.

At first, I was the only one talking, and then by day three I think, it was like "Can I go first? I have something I have to tell!" "I need to share." You know so now, they share a lot about themselves during the day, and they know that I'm listening, and so I'm hoping that by setting that groundwork, by the time that they're teenagers, [when] they'll be doing things that I don't approve of, that at least they'll come to me and tell me that they're doing them.

Renee's stories about her children's lives include little about school or academic achievements. There are no comments about test measurements to define "better than" or "deficiencies." Her child's learning style is only briefly mentioned. Instead the focus is on Renee's relationships with her children, her daughters' relationships with each other and her values and goals for them. What stands out about Renee's story is the consistency of priorities that she says she values on a personal basis and what she reports are priorities at school that she has observed in her role as a parent.

I don't know what else to tell you about their lives, other than they are very active; they're very joyful kids . . . They love each other a lot. They like to write about their relationships with other people. They seem very much able to see things from other people's perspectives, which developmentally at that age you wonder sometimes if they're able to do, but they're able to do that very well. They can put themselves in other people's shoes. And they just have a great, I think, they're a great lover of life, which is just—I think of the way they're being raised.

Renee concludes her comments, “there’s so much more to say, but I hope what I’ve said is similar to what other people have said.” Perhaps this is an expression of hope that there are more within this community who share her priorities and values. Vic’s story has parallels as he expresses that sense of awe for his child’s very existence.

***Vic’s Story: “We Were Acutely Aware of Just How Wonderful Having a Child is”***

Vic begins his story telling me about his daughter Rorie celebrating her birthday as a first grade student at school. He introduces me to Rorie, and his philosophy that everything about her life is special. Like Renee, he talks about his child with a sense of reverence for her life:

They light a candle and everybody sits in a circle and the parents come as they can. They light a candle and the child circles the candles and as the child is walking around you talk about what happened in that child’s life that year, what’s significant, what sort of milestones, what sort of fun things happened, things that you remember . . . and [they] may not be significant, but they’re memorable anyway. Some of them are much more prophetic.

From this solemn beginning, Vic shares his sense of awe that his daughter Rorie even came into being.

She was an in-vitro baby so the beginning of her life is significant in that she had pretty long odds and she started out as one little egg and we were pretty sure it was not going to work out and we were surprised and delighted when she was born and she actually came into the world.

Vic’s sense of wonder, his delight in Rorie’s being, his acceptance of who she is permeates his story.

We were acutely aware of just how wonderful having a child is, and I remember making a solemn oath to never complain about having a child after all the grief we'd gone through. I really sort of do feel that way, think that basically every minute we've had her has been a delight, even the tough stuff has been good.

I think of words like, "sacred," "holy," "God-given" as I listen to Vic talk about Rorie. From the very beginning of his story Vic clearly ties his personal values with his choice of education for Rorie.

Both my wife and I think we are just taking things a year at a time and enjoy that and not being obsessive about raising her in some sort of structured or formatted way. The other thing I think is important is that we are both very values driven people. I think that is something that drives and tends to mark who I am as a person and I think that has some sort of linkage with the choice of schools we made, probably a very powerful linkage.

Vic describes Rorie as happy, upbeat, "like Heidi" he tells me, "not at all stressed out" "really enjoying life," "very individualistic." "Her reference point is her own compass," "a bit skeptical about authority," he tells me. He describes his daughter as having a "funny mixture" because she is both very social and interested in social interaction, but also very individualistic. "That's complex in terms of how one balances that out, especially in a little life if you've got a nine-year-old view of that." As Vic talks about Rorie, he is reflective, positive, and completely unjudgmental about Rorie even when he shares the story about her dislike of soccer even though he was assisting as the team coach.

I am a values driven person so I'm given you this very abstract, you know, values driving sort of concept driven view of the life of this little nine year old, but that's certainly the way I process reality. When I think about it, that's one of the first ways I think about it abstractly.



The other thing is unambiguously there is that you know there's this little life that just unfolds in front of you and it's remarkable. You're just there for the ride, you know you've got a little bit of influence in terms of what they develop into. You mostly I think can play a role in terms of unambiguously loving them and supporting them, making sure they don't drift off and get caught up in their anger, frustration or loneliness or alienation because that produces behaviors that we worry about.

If you focus on those underlying things that give her a sense of really feeling loved and valued, you don't worry so much about how she's behaving as an issue, although it's important, it's not as critical I think.

Vic talks about his interest in learning about religion saying he reads theology in his spare time. He never uses the words of Quaker religious beliefs, "God within" or "inner goodness" but I can think of no other words that I would use to explain why he talks as he does about Rorie. He describes his role as being supportive, not directive. He seems patient as a parent and both willing and comfortable with the idea that Rorie will evolve into who she is supposed to be. For Rorie's parents, school choice has been an intentional decision that supports their core beliefs and values.

*Friends education as a beacon or moral yardstick.* Vic explains that he had friends with Friends school experience and that his wife taught at a Friends school in another state. "Thinking about a child's life, obviously you are going to think about their education . . . That was sort of a no-brainer for us." "Flaky" is the word he uses to describe the Friends school when contrasting it to his own experience at "pretty conservative prep schools." "I had never gone to a public school growing up and going to private schools, and I had always felt, I had very mixed feelings about that, so I drove over and looked at the [local public] school and . . . I said,"

You know I think educationally the school looks fine, but the problem is that she's not going to get any values education there. She won't get that sense that they can't in a public school environment. They talk about values, but they can do it but it's in a very restricted format. . . . They take one misstep, you know they've got thirty pissed off parents all demanding that the values in education change in some way because they've offended some people and Friends don't they just don't worry about that. They just kind of march right through and talk about values.

And *values are just like for me, primary*. Values, for me that's where they begin. So they begin with a year, they talk about, okay. They don't talk about their curriculum. The first thing they say is how are we going to live together this year. Let's talk about collectively about what the rules ought to be while we're together. To me even if I felt her education was really challenged in some other areas, we're going to catch her up on that stuff. We're not worried about that.

Schooling as the source of academic excellence in the traditional sense of best, highest scores, or advanced classes is not Vic's priority. Rather, it is values that are taught, modeled, and reinforced that are his priority for Rorie's education. Like Renee, he talks a lot about valuing his child's relationships and the process of developing that part of who she is. He describes "Friends" as "counter culture," and my glimpse of Vic through his story makes me feel that Vic is also a bit "counter culture" in that he too is not too concerned about following mainstream values. He is very comfortable with the idea that his child will be defined by her own expectations, not someone else's including his own.

Within the Friends School, there's always this enormous tension between utter flakiness you know in the sense that their reference point is very individualistic. I would say that the Friends as a group are, *I like to call them, a beacon. They are a reference point*. You know they're really not interested in what the mainstream cultural values may or may not be. They really look to their own and the Friends values overall as a central reference point which makes them as they always have been.

There's always a subset of Friends within the larger group that are pretty radical and overall *they tend to be a bit on the counter-cultural side which I think particularly now a days is a very healthy thing*. And I think I individually also feel some of the tension about the values that our society is currently embracing at least through major institutions in our society. I'm very troubled by that [contemporary institutional values]. I think they are shortsighted and destructive sort of values and I think that we as a couple really were attracted to that [counter culture side].

In his book, Permissible Advantage, Alan Peshkin (2001) concludes his study of Edgeworth Academy with some serious questions about "elite" educational opportunities where the focus is on being "best" and a consuming message that says, "look at me" or "look at us" because the school "elevates" itself relative to others (p. 121). Peshkin finds the emphasis on achieving and promoting high test scores, elite college acceptances, and empowerment of the already powerful, disturbing and he elaborates on these concerns in his concluding chapter. His experience at Edgeworth Academy raises questions about the "moral yardstick," and he wonders aloud . . . what students do with their lives" (2001, p. 123).

While it is not within the framework of this study to examine what students in this project have done with their lives after leaving the school, I did find it interesting to hear some parents reflect on the relationship of their children's educational experiences at the Friends school and their affirmation of Friends values. These segments appear throughout this project even though the major themes of the stories are found scattered through various sections of the analysis.

I would have expected to hear Sue and Charles express some kind of positive statements about the values of Friends education and how those values played out in

Thad's ownership of his story about repeating sixth grade. And I would have expected those who define themselves in terms of Quaker values or beliefs to make some connections between life values and Friends education. But testimonies about the impact of Friends education are not limited to those who use religious language by which to talk about values or those who identify themselves as Quakers. Interestingly this talk about the priority of values, when it emerges in the stories of those whose main theme has been either that of the "the conflicted mother" or "under certain conditions," always appears at the end of the story. These are also some of the folks who "are Quakers, but they don't know it."

These stories have an interesting sequential pattern. First the child is identified as somewhere else in public, independent or a home school setting. This situation is not working out well for a variety of reasons. Then in most of these cases almost a last desperation effort, the parents decide to try the Friends School. The child is very quickly described as happy at school. Then the story concludes with these parents connecting Friends educational values particularly those of community, peace, integrity, and equality with who their child is now or how their child is happy at school and statements that say something about the consistency of values expressed at school now being consistent with either their child's core values, the parents' values, or both. *The process of education,*<sup>4</sup> not

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<sup>4</sup> Independent School Management defines independent schools as falling into three categories, Product, Process, and Value Schools. Product Schools are those that seek to be academically the premiere school in the market. A "Process School" seeks to create a uniquely excellent physical or a psychological learning environment, engaging in uniquely excellent pedagogical approaches. Value Schools are those that are neither Product or Process schools but are unique based on value and price (Ideas & Perspectives, 2006a). A thematic focal point of a Process School is a nurturing environment and the promise of a "joyous and fulfilled life of learning" (Ideas & Perspectives, 2006b).

*the product of education, becomes the conclusion of these stories.* Rita's story shows this pattern of evolution. As the Co-Head of the school says, "Some people are really Quakers, some just don't know it."

***Rita's Story: "All They Talked about was Testing"***

Rita is a professional in public education and like many participants in this project is very familiar with public education in the community and she has a network of professional resources to call upon. She tells me that her professional involvement in public education spans nearly thirty years, but that if "tempted to put my child in private school, it would be during junior high school because I think that's a really hard period of time for kids in public schools."

She begins her story with the acknowledgement that there are multiple school options and that where you live is not necessarily where "your" school is located.

You could no longer assume just because you were living in this neighborhood that you went to a school anywhere near by. So it turned out the place where we wanted to buy a house went to Southside Elementary, which was a fairly high risk school in the center of town, that did not have a very good, you know, there were lots of kids at risk there.

A few phone calls and after consulting with professional colleagues, Rita found a space for her first child at Lakeland, a public magnet school noted for its high test scores with a focus on communications. "It's my first introduction to busing kids all over town. Well, my first meeting with the teachers was a symbol of things to come." Rita laughs, but not because this is a humorous story. Early in her story the tension of what she knows professionally to be good for children and what she finds herself accepting for her own

children's education becomes apparent. While testing may be a public measure of what is "excellent education," relationships, that are not measured, as Rita shares in her story, also are important for a child's overall well being and happiness.

It was the first of school and all the teachers talked about were the tests that would happen at the end of school. That was their focus you know. 'Lakeland has gotten high test scores, in the past. We're going to maintain high test scores, and I could see that throughout the year there were many things that Liza did that were specifically designed to help her pass the tests at the end of the year.

Instead of reading books, she read passages and answered all the questions. I don't know that she read any books that year except if it was for Accelerated Reader, so it seemed. So here was a magnet school, a communications magnet school, high test, you know had high test achievement scores.

There were many parents who brought their children all the way from [the opposite side of the county] just so they could go to Lakeland because it was a high test score school.

Rita quickly sees the discrepancy between what she knows to be appropriate teaching methods and what she observes in her child's classroom.

I continued to have concerns about . . . the nature of school, what it was like. For example it was like months before Liza talked about meeting any friends. And I said, "this is probably because as soon as they walked in the door, they were given worksheets." They were just supposed to sit down at their desks. For months they never had any PE time because they didn't 'earn it,' because they would misbehave.

So there was actually no social time as part of the school day in third grade and there wasn't any time for Liza to even get to know friends. I mean it was just this incredibly academically oriented, no idea of the social needs these kids these kids might have. Talking was like taboo, and I may not be completely accurate about that, . . . I did walk in, the bell hadn't even rung yet. The kids were supposed to come in quietly, put their backpacks away and get their morning work and get started on it. . .

Liza's always been a good student, I mean she would do her homework, she would do what her teachers asked her to do uh . . . What I what I was seeing was Liza was losing interest in school, she didn't want to get up in the morning, she didn't want to go to school.

Concerned about what she was observing, Rita says she took Liza to visit another public magnet school but Liza was not interested in making a change. Finally, very concerned about what she was seeing and encouraged by a colleague, she decided to visit the Friends School, even though she could not imagine that her daughter would be interested in making a change in schools.

She's not an outgoing child, she's sort of quiet, and socially this would be a really huge adjustment for her to want to switch schools in February or March. But Liza agreed to go which that in itself surprised me . . . I left her and she was there all day long. She loved it. And she came home and said, "I want to do it." And to me that was just amazing because for Liza to take that kind of risk, I think really indicated how unhappy she had gotten with what was going on in her classroom at the public school.

And so that convinced me. I said, "here's the child that is just going down hill in terms of her interest." She saw something at Friends School that was so appealing to her that she would be willing to make that kind of transfer during mid year, and that really impressed me, so I said, 'Okay, we'll do it.' So she pretty much just started the next week. . . . She fit in. She really liked it. She liked the teachers. They liked her and she did very well. For her it was a really good match and so she stayed.

I was so happy that Liza was in middle school at Friends School. She's shy, makes friends but she's not real outgoing and here she was with a group of thirty students into middle school. I just feel really good about that for Liza. Here was a small group of teachers that knew the kids well, kids that knew each other.

One of the things that Friends School does so much is their social curriculum. You know, helping kids get along, making sure that everybody feels accepted, things that I don't think that the public school, I don't think it's that they don't care about, but they are so consumed about getting those test scores that they don't really have time to . . . Once in a while I get a little tired of the fact that Friends School has a whole month on reaching consensus on their class rules.

Rita is conflicted about what a Friends education is about. On the one hand she acknowledges that her child has made friends, that teachers know her child, and that Liza is in a school where getting along is important. She honestly reflects that to her, the processes to make that happen “are tiresome.” Public schools she believes do not have the time for social curriculum priorities yet relationships, including relationships with teachers (Brosnan, 2001) is what she believes was missing in Liza’s earlier public school experience. Rita knows this tension when she explains further, “They spend so much time on community building sometimes, in fact that sense of community which Liza was able to be with that group throughout her junior high years I’m just thankful for.” Unlike high test scores that initially attracted her and others to Lakeland, it is the relationships and the priority of the social curriculum that she ultimately acknowledges as important.

Rita is aware that she is in a unique situation in that she has been able to pay school tuition without it being a financial sacrifice as she assumes it is for other families. Public school with no parental control over class and teacher selection, versus sending her second child to a school where she knows the teaching staff “seemed like a no brainer. Why if I can afford to do it, why would I not do it?”

“Control,” though that word is not used often by those in this study, is an important element of the decision to attend independent school. Rachel talked about it when she talked about her fears for Lee and her expectation for conferences on demand by either her or the teachers. Leah talked about control when she said she expected to be able to go to the principal or teacher and say “Nate needs . . .” Rita clearly acknowledges



that independent schooling increases parental control, describing it as a “no brainer. Why if I can afford to do it, why would I not do it?”

*Discovering authentic education.* Describing her younger child as “not a natural student” Rita talks about her frustrations with Friends School. I do not know what “natural student” means—but my sense as she talks about her frustrations is that Tara’s academic performance is not satisfactory at least to her. She describes teaching methods and aspects of the curriculum that she feels need to be different. Quite taken back by her critique, I ask her, “why do you stay?”

First there are two things. There would be no guarantee that their needs would be better met in the [other public] schools. They could be. I know individual teachers. If I could just say I’m going to put Tara in a particular classroom, I might be tempted to do that, but of course I can’t.

The other part is what Friends School offers; a truly child-centered school, and I don’t think we can say that about public schools today. *Public school teachers might want child centered but the message that they get is that you’ve got to pass end grade tests, and it’s all this accountability stuff that teachers are under pressure to do.* I’m pleased with the fact that at Friends School they don’t have to take end-grade tests. . . .

Children are not there learning something because there’s a test. That is just never a message that they get. I mean they do have assessments now and then, for example, in math, Tara knows there’s an assessment coming up, but there’s just not that whole talk, that just is not there which to me is such inauthentic reasons to learn. So that at Friends School, the purposes they give children for learning things are more real.

Rita tells me about a professional workshop she attended recently – it points out her insights about education that reflect the conflict between her work in public education and the choice she has made for educating her own children:

The presenter asked, “what are schools’ about?” He said, “Schools should be about us learning how to live with each other,” and I wrote that down and I said, “That’s what Friends School is about, about us learning how to live with each other.” If you talk with public schools what would they say? I don’t think they would come up with that answer. I can’t imagine any public school that would say, “That’s what we’re about.”

Rita’s story at this point tells me that she knows what her own conflicts are, academics at the expense of relationships. As a public school educator, Rita admits that she does not have a Friends School sticker on her car. She says that she realizes that attending private school means that her children are privileged. She knows that because she can afford to make choices, she can control what she believes is “best” for her children.

When she is asked about her choice of education for her own children she tells me that she usually says that decision was based on the “negative impact” of testing on her child. Testing, I assume, is probably a safe rationale for not sending her children to public schools since testing is currently unpopular with many that work in public education.

I feel like I continue to work for public education in lots and lots of ways but having my child in public education is not going to improve public education . . . . I just have to look for the best situation. Like I said I am privileged. I can afford to have some choices.

Rita is truthful about her sense making of education at least for her own children. Though she describes herself as privileged she still has not resolved the conflicting tension of academics and happiness. It appears that both priorities can not be accomplished even when you are privileged and know a lot about education. “I continue

to be a bit frustrated. But there's no schools that are perfect. *There's no perfect school out there, so at least I haven't found them.*"

***Becoming a crossover artist.*** Even saying that, Rita's story is not over. When I ask her if there is anything else she wants to tell me about her children's lives, she begins a whole new theme. It is as though before our time together is over, she has to tell me more—this time the story is not about her children, it is about herself. Her own longing for meaning now is part of her story and helps explain how she resolves the conflicts that seemed so apparent before.

I think another reason why I like Friends School is because I grew up as a Presbyterian who was, whose family was very involved in church. In college, I moved away from that and ever since then and throughout my married life we have just have not been a church going family. We have not been associated with a church. And I think another one of the things that I like about my children going to Friends School is that there's a spiritual part to that too. They have meetings on Friday uh you know and at this point in my life if I was if I was going to be a member of a church I probably would go with Friends Meeting.

I have as much a connection with that place of worship as any place in town because we've been there for lots of things. . . . and so that's another piece that I like. We as a family have not provided that (church) but and that's why I'm pleased with the fact that Liza has become a really regular [attender]. She doesn't go to meeting on Sunday morning, she always goes on Friday evening and on Wednesday evening and takes part in the discussions and I'm thinking if they can turn Liza into a Quaker, it's perfectly okay with me. The Quaker philosophy is the best philosophy that I know. . . .

Right now if I was going to portray myself with any particular religion I think it would be Quaker and what the Quakers stand for. To me Quakers represent tolerance, they're tolerant for different sexual orientations. They are tolerant of color; they're tolerant. . . . I think that's part of the school philosophy as well as the Quaker philosophy, I really do like that. . . . That's an important part of why I've kept Tara at that school and *why I was glad that Liza was there.*"

Listening to her words, I am reminded of Lorene Carey's (1992) words in her autobiography reflecting on her experience as an inner city Black child who attended St. Paul's, an exclusive Episcopal prep school. As an adult she explains to her Black high school friends her decision to teach for a year at St. Paul's, "*It is like admitting who I am. I came here and I went away changed. I've been fighting that for a long time, to no purpose. I am a crossover artist, you know like those jazz musicians who do pop albums too*" [italics added] (Carey, 1991, p. 233). Like Lorene Carey, Rita is also a crossover artist. She understands the values of the world of independent education even though that is not her professional world.

***"You become part of a community."***

When you become a Friends School parent you become part of a community, and I haven't been a real active part of that community. Well I mean there are things, we always go to pot luck suppers, there are all kind of productions, and I help out in the classroom at least some, but that's a big part of that school is the there's so many, parents are so involved in that school and also it it's an opportunity for me as a parent to meet a lot of people and that kind of thing.

I value those kinds of connections on a different level above and beyond Liza's relationships. I think about, "well maybe I should just put Tara at Newton [a public elementary school] next year," I think, "I wouldn't see all those people, and Tara would miss her friends." The kids do get to be tight. I mean it is a small group that goes through . . . They are two years in each classroom. The two classrooms work together a great deal. They really know the kids in their age range as well as in the entire school. It just makes for a very, you know, they do a lot of community building, active community building, but there is just a sense of community building that's there all the time because it is a fairly small place with perhaps not as much turnover as public schools, there's some turnover, but . . . probably not much bigger chance that a child will walk into a grade and half the kids will be somebody that they don't know.

Because she is there, as she talks about her independent school experiences, Rita's story and sense of what really matters is changed. Independent education is for her no longer that secret garden with the tightly locked gate. Instead she has walked through the door and she shifts her story priorities. In the end the story is no longer about academics, or frustrations with how a particular subject is taught. The story is all about the relationships—hers as well as her child's. Quakers believe that truth is continuously emerging—Rita's story illustrates that belief.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

#### Overview of Project

I started this project because I believe that parents who have selected independent education for their children, particularly Quaker education, are a source of stories that contribute to a broader conversation about education. These stories increase understanding of the role of independent schooling in the larger institution of education.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge again my own participation in independent education, both as a parent and employee. Therefore I continuously remember to ask myself, is this project a means of rationalizing my own choices? As Ellen Brantlinger (2003) so directly challenges, I ask myself if I am an educated self-serving liberal while not really supporting liberal, i.e., democratic values? Are parents who chose independent education acting only on behalf of their advantage-seeking self-interest (Brantlinger, 2003; Peshkin, 2001)? Is it possible that there are examples from parents' stories that can contribute to a sense of hope, possibilities, or at least, insights about parents' values and priorities that extend beyond personal benefit and disregard of the needs of the Other? Can independent education therefore be a moral alternative in a democratic society?

Within this research project there is the very real tension between public education, which is ostensibly created to provide equal opportunities, and independent education, which can provide opportunities for personal advantage (Peshkin, 2001). The

democracy argument says that education in a democracy should not permit advantages for some at the expense of others. Democracy is about equality, relationships and a sense of care and concern for others while at the same time respecting the rights of the individual.

Democratic values, relationships of care and concern for others, responsiveness to individual needs, and equality reflecting the fullest regard for the worth of each individual, are intimately connected. It has been understood since the days of Plato, that democratic ideals and education have been intertwined with the value of “being good.” “Knowledge is goodness” is the Socratic conclusion of this lengthy discussion included in Chapter II. In that same chapter I review the work of Nel Noddings and Jane Roland Martin, who are concerned with the connections of education and relationships as well as Carol Gilligan and other contemporary philosophers whose work focus on morality based on relationships with others.

John Dewey developed contemporary ideas connecting democracy and education in the United States. His writing and teaching about progressive education describe a form of educational practices where noncompetition, equality, experiential learning and relationships are priorities (Dewey, 1916). Interestingly, today Dewey’s ideas are more likely to be found implemented in elite independent schools (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 67).

I discuss Brantlinger’s research of educated middle class professional mothers who she finds reject progressive education. These conflicting realities, mothers’ rejection of progressive education in public schools, and the presence of progressive education in independent schools that are not equally available undergirds my fundamental research

question. Is choosing independent education a means of securing personal advantage, or might this be a moral alternative, particularly when viewed in the context of historical aims of education in a democratic society, today's educational issues, and children's needs as interpreted by parents?

I have argued that there are at least two significant problems that emerge from the idea that public education is the only form of education acceptable in a democracy. First, in a democratic society, there should be a legitimate public interest in progressive education. Second, there are significant challenges to implementing a *moral curriculum* in a *secular state*. In Chapter II I discuss the dilemma of instituting a moral curriculum and share my own longings for shared values that reflect care and concern for others. Finally, I believe that independent schools, by virtue of their independence have the autonomy to define and implement a school's curriculum (Kane, 1991a), *including the overt and covert moral lessons that are part of that curriculum*.

In Chapter III, I place myself within the context of this project, review narrative research methodology and make the case that this project benefits from narrative research. First, Quaker education and the community of those familiar with it is small, and familiarity with this form of independent education is limited. Friends Schools educate fewer than one-half percent of all students in nonpublic education (Council for American Private Education, 2007). Such a small group represents a very small voice that is easily ignored or simply not a presence in the larger conversation about education. Second, participants in a narrative project, by virtue of telling their own stories, define the issues and their own sense of truth, as they understand that truth to be.



Hearing stories of these parents can lead to broader and more insightful questions, possible answers and greater understanding about participation in independent education. As a methodology, story telling becomes a means “to put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition, if only temporarily” (Casey, 1996, p. 216). It is a “way of knowing carved out of experience, experience as it is inflected by particular cultural, geopolitical, and material circumstances” (Langellier, 1999, pp. 136-137) that can only be gleaned by listening to those who know this experience.

While working on this project, I learned that a number of the participants were themselves experienced public school educators. While it was not a formal part of this research project, I also discovered that there was much interest in this project expressed by personal friends and colleagues. Those who had no personal experience with independent education often shared critical or disdainful comments about the faceless others who do participate in independent education. Such conversations only confirmed for me that this was an important project that needed to be explored further and that narrative research methodology was the ideal tool by which to do that.

### **Findings**

These stories of parents who have selected independent education are complex and not cleanly categorized. Some stories contain recognized as well as unrecognized and unresolved conflicts. To say that there are multiple conversations would be to oversimplify the findings. However, when parents are asked to respond to the prompt, “tell me the story of your child’s life,” they talk from a framework of one or more of the three identified *themes* that became apparent even before all the narratives were collected.

While one of these three themes dominates each narrative, storytellers did not necessarily limit themselves to just one theme. In some cases, a story begins with one dominant theme and then changes, typically moving into Quaker talk and values when the story came to the section of their child's life as a student at the Friends school.

I have given each of these themes a name: (a) *Meeting Needs* that includes four distinct sub-themes describing the needs of the child, the family or both. (b) *Under Certain Conditions* describes school conditions that are either wonderfully positive or highly unsatisfactory based on both public and independent school experiences, and (c) *Some People are Quakers; Some Just Don't Know It*, considers a group of parents that talk from a philosophical basis emphasizing social justice or equality or who specifically talk about Quaker values in the context of their child's education.

### ***Meeting Needs***

As I listened to parents talk about "needs" I found myself dividing them into four distinct categories of needs: (a) Fixing children and academic success, (b) The conflicted mother, (c) Seeking social justice, and (d) Needs of today's families.

***Fixing children and academic success.*** Children and family's needs as described by parents are very real. Some of these needs are a professionally identified deficiency or difference that is actively addressed with therapies and medications. Some needs, even if they are real, are also like the shadows described in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, (Waterfield, (Trans.) Republic) briefly described in Chapter II. Like the prisoners described in the Allegory, some independent school parents seek and find delight in acceptable rewards that may actually be "shadows" like in the Allegory, because they

seek “prizes” or value those “shadows” that are based on quantitative measurements of their children’s academic success in school that become the child’s identity.

Many parents talk about their child’s differences where some form of intervention is implemented. Academic achievement rather than their child’s happiness or growth in positive relationships dominates these parents’ stories. This is not to imply that other parents in this project did not share their concerns or an awareness of their children’s differences. Others did. What makes this group distinct is that someone portrays the child as deficient, generally an “expert,” and the major sequence of these parents’ stories are the steps to identify, remove or at least accommodate these deficiencies. The child’s deficits overshadow any talk about their child’s gifts, strengths, and unique being. This first group of parents does not talk about their children using phrases like, “that’s how he/she is.”

*The conflicted mother.* A second theme of needs closely related to the stories told in “Fixing Children and Academic Success” talk about perceptions and fears of other people’s children. These needs are expressed in stories of conflicted pedagogy (Brantlinger, 2003). While many parents stories in this project, including my own, have conflicting pedagogy, one story in particular shows this pattern (Chapter IV) that I call “The Conflicted Mother.” This story begins with educational decisions made based on perceptions of other people’s children and conflicting messages about who the child really is.

Concerns about being academically “average” is a dominating initial theme. Enrolling in independent school as a means of “gearing up” i.e., strengthening an average

child for academic success is, according to Brosnan (2001), a common reason why parents choose to invest in independent education. However, as Brosnan counters, a more important reason to enroll a child in independent school ought to be because the *relationships* that a child has with teachers, and the excitement of learning from their friends, ultimately, the more important benefits or “return on investment” (p. 60).

In contrast, other parents in this project whose children might be considered academically “average” do not talk about academic measures as the definition of their children. Interestingly in this project of the nineteen participants, only three of the stories are dominated by talk about quantitative measurement of success in academics, meeting age determined norms, and disparaging references to or negative implications about other people’s children. The remaining sixteen parents’ stories focus on various qualitative issues that can be broadly classified under relationships. Notably, none of these qualitative issues are reflected in public school benchmarks of acceptable yearly progress used as measurements of excellence in public schools today.

***Seeking a community of fairness.*** A third group of parents talk about needing a school that they are assured will be a community of fairness. These mothers talk about how their families are different. Three are lesbian mothers and one is an African American mother. There is no implication that these mothers seek independent education to “gear up” their children (Brosnan, 2001) for quantitative measures of academic success. Instead, these stories come out of concerns about societal deficiencies. Specifically these mothers share their fears of and experiences with homophobia and racism. These mothers talk about the decision to be in a school where there is

documented assurance of fairness; a demonstrated commitment to inclusive relationships, intentional community building, and equality is a priority.

As the Black mother shared, she knew that she needed to find a school where her child would be known rather than be another nameless Black male adolescent interchangeable with any other Black student but she expresses concern and hope that she is “doing the right thing.” The other mothers talked about being in a school community where they would belong. All of these stories are about intentionally doing what is “right” for their child and family, i.e., providing a school environment where fairness and social justice is foundational.

*Supporting today’s families.* The final group of needs is expressed by parents who talk about needing school as an extension of home and parenting. Their stories of lived experience support the philosophical positions more extensively reviewed in Chapter II of Nel Noddings (2002, 2003) and Jane Roland Martin (1992). These parents do not talk about other people’s children as a reason to reject public school education. Rather they are seeking a model of education that embodies what they consider best parenting to supplement their children’s lives and they do not find that in public education. This Friends school has been selected to fill the “domestic vacuum” that Martin describes in the lives of children today (Martin, 1992, p. 210). Emotional safety, a nurturing environment, school as an extension of home or a model of what home and family relationships are mentioned as priorities for the education of their children. These parents acknowledge that school is the major part of their children’s daily lives and there is no wavering on the importance of school as an extension and supplement to family.

### *Under Certain Conditions*

It was never intended as part of this project to polarize independent and public schooling. Rather, the intent was to examine the possibility that independent education could be a moral alternative given the issues of democracy and education in the context of equality as discussed in Chapter II.

When I began this project I did not anticipate that parents would so clearly focus on positive relationships within school. The stories that describe “Under Certain Conditions” in Chapter V demonstrate the impact of children’s happiness (or unhappiness) at school. Campbell (2006) points out that “the boundaries of happiness have yet to be adequately characterized by empirical research” (p. 32). However, these parents’ stories do give insights into what conditions can define the boundaries of happiness at school.

Interestingly, the most important pattern that emerged is that when children are described as “happy” their parents do not talk much about academic measurements of success or the overall quality (or lack of quality) of teachers or a school and they do not talk negatively about other people’s children. However, when children are described as being unhappy the stories also include examples of negative behavior on the part of teachers and peers, and parental dissatisfaction with academic standards.

Once experienced, parents talk about the intentional social curriculum of this Friends school and how they understand this priority to positively impact on their children’s happiness and well being at school. Unhappiness, lack of positive social relationships and concerns about the kind of moral lessons being learned at school were

the most frequently cited reasons that parents changed their child's school setting, whether it be from public or independent school to the Friends school.

When children are described as happy at school there is an abundance of narrative about positive relationships, examples of learning in the context of community, and examples of the valuable moral lessons that children are learning at school. Parents who describe their children as happy talk about the importance community, peace, social relationships, concern for others and their child's joy for life and love of learning. This pattern supports Nodding's recommendation that "*we must provide the conditions [in schools] under which children can be truly happy*" [italics added] (2003, p. 49).

***Some People are Really Quakers; Some Just Don't Know It***

Progressive education defines in secular language educational priorities and practices that also describe Quaker education. No one within this project used the words "progressive education" or "Friends testimonies." Parents did talk a lot using words that describe educational practices that are consistent with both of these concepts. These parents, some of whom identify themselves as Quakers and others who are not, use key words, to describe their children and educational practices that are consistent with the Friends testimony of equality.

"**Tolerance**" is used to describe something unique about a child that is accepted. "Tolerance" or acceptance is key to the concept of equality. "That's how he/she is" is a phrase interjected to confirm tolerance, or a need for acceptance of a child without an implication that this is a deficit or that it needs "fixing." At most parents talk about accommodations at school to supplement or support the student as s/he is. When one

parent describes his son's love of mathematics, he acknowledges that to be successful in mathematics, he needs a calculator. The father expresses both tolerance and acceptance saying, "That's just how he is."

**"Gift(s)"** is used to recognize an individual child's strengths that are valued by the parents and important at school. Gifts may be being good in mathematics, a good writer, comfort with social relationships, or a strong sense of fairness. "Gifts" are not discussed in the context of test scores, achievements or "excellence" if excellence is defined as being better than or compared to others.

**"Equality"** a Quaker testimony includes being considered as having equal value because there is that of God in everyone. Equality includes learning styles and abilities, race, gender expression and orientation, family configuration, etc.

**"Peace"** a Quaker testimony includes teaching children peaceful conflict resolution, an emphasis on non-competitiveness and cooperative learning, all concepts of progressive education.

Parents who talk "Quaker talk," whether they are Quakers or not, talk a lot about relationships and the importance of social interaction and intentional teaching of social skills at school (Charney, 2002). There is a strong pattern of acceptance of their children and expressed delight in them, as they are. Quakers and those who share Friends priorities, talk about "community, peace, equality, and simplicity" and how these are priorities in the education of their children. Dewey, I believe, would consider all of this and the related educational practices consistent with his educational goal of democracy as "associated living" (1916, p. 87).



### ***Progressive Education and Quaker Education***

I believe that “happiness” and the value of relationships are closely related and both are associated with educational practices that are consistent with progressive education and Quaker education. Parents articulate their value of progressive education in either secular language, or by the use of religious language, often with reference to Friends testimonies or values. This language pattern echoes principles put forth by John Dewey (1900, 1916, 1938, 1998), Maxine Greene (1988), Douglas Heath (1994), Jane Roland Martin (1992), Nel Noddings (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003, 2006) and other educational philosophers who address the importance and interconnectedness of relationships and education and how this combination is basic to democratic education. As discussed in Chapter II, *it is through relationships that goodness or a moral identity of individual goodness is formed.*

Relationships, I propose, are not a priority in many schools today, be they public, selective public, or independent schools. Most parents in this project, all but two of the nineteen interviewed, eventually talk about either relationships or moral goodness or both, and how these are priorities for the education of their children regardless of the major theme that initiates and dominates their stories.

***Educated parents and schools.*** As discussed in Chapter II, Ellen Brantlinger’s (2003) research on educated middle class professional parents presents possible reasons why progressive education is not more prevalent in public schools. She concludes that progressive schooling has few supporters among influential classes. Middle class educated mothers, though they say they support progressive educational ideals, when

they actually talk about educational practices, they express a preference for traditional education *because it advantages their own children in public schools*.

I believe that there is another issue not explored in Brantlinger's research of public school parents. By *not* including in her study *parents who select independent education*, the voices of a significant number of educated, professional middle class and upper middle class parents, much like those participants in her studies, are not included.

Though this project did not formally solicit information about parents' education and types of work, some of that information was disclosed as parents told the stories of their children's lives. I would suggest that the population of this study and those surveyed by Brantlinger have many similarities. Brantlinger's research was conducted in the university-dominated city of Bloomington, Indiana. This project was conducted in a city also dominated by higher education but located in the Southeast. Brantlinger and her participants knew each other. I knew some of my participants before the study and got to know others better after the narratives were collected. However, it must be acknowledged that there are differences in the history and patterns of public and independent education when comparing the Midwest and Southeast. Such comparisons are not a formal part of this study, though parents who relocated to the region remarked on current educational experiences that they contrasted with what they had known elsewhere.

This project supports the premise that some middle class, educated, professional parents do support progressive educational practices as Brantlinger describes:

It is understood that children learn in various ways at different rates, and diversity is expected and valued, curriculum is developed so as to be accessible and relevant to students' achievement levels and learning styles. Evaluation is flexible

and individualized; it measures personal accomplishments and does not make comparisons between them. (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 62)

These are the kind of attributes that many parents in this project seek. In addition, many parents indicate that they were seeking independent education because (a) they fear or reject current educational practices that they feel may disadvantage their children, and that (b) they believe contribute to their child's unhappiness at school. In addition, parents want a school environment where social justice and fairness i.e., moral education, is modeled, practiced, discussed, and confirmed (Noddings, 2006, p. 113) because they want their children to learn the "morality of association" rather than "morality of authority" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 62).

"Testing" was the most frequently cited public school practice that parents talked about as a reason to seek out independent education regardless of the major theme of their story. Parents express fear of or distaste for the impact of current state and federal mandated testing and they talk about the lack of positive relationships in schools where testing is a priority. When parents talk about a school environment where there is an intentional social curriculum, such as this Friends School, they are talking about relationships and the related moral lessons. Their stories include examples that support *that learning about relationships and living in community*, core priorities of progressive education, are priorities for their child's education at school.

As discussed in Chapter II, Brantlinger's analysis of narratives found that mothers introduced themselves as "liberal" but terminated their stories with educational

preferences that did not support that initial position. *This is not the narrative pattern found within many of these stories.*

Parents' stories about their children's experience in the Friends school show a *distinct pattern of talking that placed relationships and happiness in a more dominant role than talk about academics.* Parents talk about an intentional social curriculum where children learn self-management and positive relationships with others. When parents are not satisfied with the moral lessons their children are learning at this school, they talk about the *problem-solving process by which those issues are discussed.*

An alternative to Brantlinger's conclusions could be that *some parents do not believe that they have the power to determine or influence public school educational practices.* Therefore, they express their concerns i.e., they exercise their power, by leaving public schools (or they do not attend them in the first place). These parents seek education that reflects the priorities, values and moral lessons associated with progressive education and find them in a Friends school.

For some parents, at least many of those who select an independent Friends School where the testimonies of "simplicity" and "equality" are important, academic achievement and attainment of material outcomes, may not be as important as Brantlinger (2003) implies but does not actually study. Equating all independent schools with elite schools, as described by Peshkin (2001) would be erroneous. It would not be a fair assumption that this disregard of academic achievement and attainment posited by Brantlinger is based solely on sufficient parental economic resources.

While there were families in this study that I would assume could be called elite in terms of their available economic resources and life style patterns (as shared in their stories), many participants would be classified as educated middle-class like Brantlinger's sample. Priorities of families in this particular sample could be based on their moral beliefs and an understanding that *moral lessons are learned at school and some of these parents are seeking the moral lessons to be found at this school.*

Two parents whose economic situation made intentional simplicity a choice, not an economic necessity, as indicated by some other parents, specifically mentioned simplicity, as a lifestyle priority. Some parent acknowledge that the moral lessons their children are learning at the Friends school affirm their own core values even though moral lessons were not the initial reason for seeking this school. Most parents eventually talk about moral values learned at school, regardless of the main theme that initiated or dominated their stories. As one parent says, "This has been good for all of us."

***Relationships and the culture of a small school.*** "Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. . . . It is especially necessary to *take the broader, or social, view* [of education]" [italics added] (Dewey, 1900, pp. 3-4). Even when parents mention academic areas that they feel need improvement, academic talk decreases in these parents' stories *if* their child is happy and *if* the social cultural norms, beliefs and values as interpreted by the parent, are consistent or harmonious with the family expectations or affirm positive social values.

Parents talk little about the quantifiable specifics of a small school like class size or the student teacher ratio. Instead they talk about school culture and the by-products of

a small school, particularly relationships and the importance of school being supportive like a “best family” (Noddings, 2003). They give extensive examples of learning in the context of *community*. Narrow academic subjects, external rewards, or grades received do not define learning.

The school’s social curriculum is frequently mentioned as a process by which children at each grade level develop *by consensus* class rules that guide their relationships with each other. One parent summed up his descriptions of teaching and learning based on relationships when he said, “That’s sort of thing you get in a little independent school.”

In Chapter II, I say that if goodness were a major force in education, there would be two significant changes in schooling and cultural beliefs. *First, response to the needs of the individual child would be a primary concern.* Some of these expectations for a response to meet a need may be, as Brantlinger proposes a desire for personal advantage. However, these parents include needs for relationships, social justice and fairness, and a response to the needs of families. These are all examples that support the philosophical positions of Noddings (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003, 2006) and Martin (1992), who make a plea for schools to reflect relationships that model the “best” home and social justice.

I propose that if goodness was important, that the language of education would reflect a desire to deal with *real moral issues* that extend beyond the limitations of fundamentalist religious language. These parents talk very little about religion but they

do talk about moral lessons that their children learn at school and in several cases, the importance of these moral lessons to the parents.

Brantlinger's reasons why parents reject progressive education includes, "The current logic of *control* mitigates against progressive schooling" (2003, p. 66). The narratives of this project should be encouragement to examine and reevaluate the use of educational practices that emphasize control as an external force. Practices that teach even young children to be *autonomous and develop internal control* can be successfully learned as these parents' stories confirm.

I believe that young children deserve a moral education, which I believe is also a democratic education. Young children deserve nothing less than to be taught about fairness, justice, compassion, love and care for one another, and how to live with one another—including those who are "different."

Gutmann (1987) emphasizes that "a primary purpose of schools is to cultivate common democratic values among all children, regardless of their academic ability, class, race, religion or sex" (p. 116). Cultivating democratic values, is a significant part of a moral education but the locus of control—(internal or external), is another important issue.

The educational practices of cooperation, emphasizing relationships, is core to progressive education and basic to the values expressed in the Friends Testimonies of peace, community, integrity, equality and simplicity. As parents shared in their stories, these values can be taught to very young children and if conscientiously applied, contribute to a good society.

“Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education” (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). One parent made this discussion simpler when she said, “*At Friends School there’s a philosophy, a way of teaching and those things stay the same.*” That philosophy is grounded in Friends testimonies.

Herein lies the dilemma. Independent education is voluntary in that people choose to participate in such schools. In the case of parents who participated in this project, they chose to send their children to a Friends school, where children are taught the moral lessons of association, i.e., fairness, cooperation, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Those are secular words that correspond to Friends testimonies of peace, community, equality, integrity and simplicity. Gutmann (1987) quickly acknowledges schools are “not terribly effective in teaching autonomy. . . . [However she concludes] “It still may be the primary political ideal for democratic education in primary schools” (p. 62).

As shown in this project, children learn important moral lessons at school. The narratives abound with examples from most of the parents in this project. Some parents intentionally seek out education that is concerned about relationships consistent with ideals of a “good society.” Others, who initially seek out Quaker education for other reasons, discover and then articulate these ideals. Once they have experienced it, parents talk about the moral values that their children are learning and experiencing at school. Many parents acknowledge that school provides a sense of *community* where their children’s moral commitments are shared and their moral identities are confirmed. Some parents are “crossover artists,” (Cary, 1992, p. 233) navigating personal careers in public



education while also expressing support for the moral lessons learned and affirmed at an independent school.

One story about “white bullying and cliques” and another story about a child’s experience at the racially segmented school that included sections for highly gifted students, are two examples that should cause us to examine how school practices support or defeat the development of what Heath calls, “metavalues” honesty and truth, fairness and compassion, integrity, commitment, freedom and courage (Heath & Heath, 1994, p. 198). One parent specifically addresses racism and inequality when she directly says, “*it’s not what you want your child to learn.*” Though her child was in an advantaged public school setting, she withdrew him because she was not happy with the moral lessons he was learning and she had serious concerns for his physical safety at school. (The school had experienced lock-downs during the year due to gunshots being fired near the school.)

All of the stories are told with sincerity and a sense of truth as it is known. They include intimate details that should touch us as we consider the role of independent education in a democratic society. Hopefully some of the details of these stories will linger as we consider the complexity of this topic, parents choosing independent education.

Independent schools have an opportunity to be a model of what schools can be for all children, schools that reflect fairness and social justice. These parents’ stories tell us that (a) There is interest in progressive education emphasizing non-competition, equality, experiential learning and relationships. (b) Relationships are important in schools, (c)

Important moral lessons are learned at school, and (d) Quaker education, at least this example, can be an informative example of democratic principles and democratic practices in schools particularly at this time in history when other priorities in public education dominate both the conversation and articulated goals of education.

One of the most important findings of this project is the confirmation that *relationships are important in schools*. Borrowing from Martin Buber, Noddings (2006) talks about the importance of modeling, discussing, practicing, and confirmation of those behaviors that are the components of a moral education:

*Confirmation can only be performed when a relation has been established. The one who is doing the confirming has to know the one who is confirmed well enough to make a reasonable, honest judgment of what the other was trying to do.* [italics added] (p. 113)

Quakers might say this is being intentional about seeing “that of God” within everyone. Others can describe this as affirming the presence of “inner goodness” within each individual. Religious language or not, I believe that “confirmation” is excellent advice, and probably applies to both students and their parents.

Small classes and the impact on effective teaching because of small classes, increase opportunities for relationships. Recent research (Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2007) suggests that class size reduction (CSR) techniques have varying degrees of effectiveness in part because teachers have not been taught how to teach in small classes and do not have experience with how to effectively maximize the opportunities of CSR settings.

Teaching as an equal partner is not a practice that traditionally trained teachers have experienced (Graue et al., 2007). Friends schools, particularly one like in this project that extensively uses small classes with two teachers per classroom who function as *equal partners*, could be very effective models to share with teacher education programs and public schools that are trying to implement small classroom techniques for the benefit of their students. Likewise, seeing examples of teaching where relationships are valued and students learn moral lessons through practice, modeling, discussion and confirmation, can be a very important opportunity for prospective teachers. A college student with extensive experience in childcare remarked after seeing a video that showed democratic educational practices (Starting Small), “I’ve never seen a class of students where they talk nice like that to each other.” Nor had most members of the class. Partnerships with teacher education programs and public schools can be a means by which others can learn the teaching strategies used in this school to benefit other children. As Noddings (2006) suggests, opportunities to model, practice, discuss, and confirm are the components for implementing a moral education.

We who care about what is happening to children can learn a lot by asking parents and guardians in a variety of school settings the question asked for this project, “Tell me the story of your child’s life.” Some stories may seem conflicted. Some stories may be painful to hear or sound self-serving and disrespectful of other people’s children. Listening carefully I believe that we will discover that parents’ stories can tell us important truths. All of the stories will increase our understanding of the lives of the

children we teach and for whom we design and implement policies and curricula. Tell me the story of your child's life. We want to listen.

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## APPENDIX A

### PRIVATE SCHOOL STATISTICS

The following information is provided by the Council for American Private Education, based on information from the National Center for Education Statistics (CAPE 2007).

#### Private School Statistics

PK-12 Enrollment (2007) = 6,536,000 (11.7% of all US Students)

Number of Private Schools (2003-2004) = 28,384 (over 25% of all US Schools)

#### Size of schools

1990-2000 private school average size = 193 students

1990-2000 public school average size = 535 students

#### Where do private school students go to school?

**2003-2004**

Catholic	46.2%
Nonsectarian	18.0%
Conservative Christian	15.1%
Baptist	5.3%
Lutheran	3.8%
Jewish	3.9%
Episcopal	1.9%
Seventh-day Adventist	1.1%
Calvinist	0.8%
Friends	0.4%

According to the U.S. Census Bureau released data (December, 2006) on the social and economic characteristics of students enrolled in the nation's schools in October 2005, 80% of students from families with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more attend public schools and 20% (1.6 million) attend private schools (CAPE 2007).

#### Friends Schools Statistics as of 2006 (<http://friendscouncil.org/library/InfoManage>)

81 member schools in 21 states

20,500 students

4,300 faculty and staff

**APPENDIX B**  
**PARENT CONSENT FORM**

Susanne P. Jordan  
905 Kemp Road West  
Greensboro, North Carolina 27410  
March 31, 2003

Dear Parents:

I am interested in researching the process by which parents make the decision to enroll their child(ren) in independent schools and will use the results of my research for my Ph.D. dissertation in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in this project. I will interview participants twice. Each interview will be 45 minutes to one and a half hours long. In the first interview I will ask, "tell me your child's life story." In the second interview we will follow up on themes from the first interview. I will also ask you to complete a brief questionnaire about your family's schooling.

I will audio record and transcribe the interviews for use in my dissertation and I also expect to publish the results of my study. The identity of participants and New Garden Friends School will be anonymous. I will destroy all recordings twelve months after completion of this project or by December 31, 2004, whichever date is later.

You may ask questions at any point. Should you wish to withdraw, your interviews will be deleted from the study without penalty. I know of no personal risks that will be experienced by participants in this study. This project is being conducted with the advice and counsel of Kathleen Casey, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Education, UNCG (275-0275). You may also contact Beverly Maddox-Britt, Ph.D. at 334-5878 for questions about rights of human participants in research projects.

I look forward to receiving your positive response and will contact you to follow up on this request. Two copies of this letter are enclosed. Please sign the consent section below on one copy of this letter and mail the letter back to me in the attached return envelope.

Sincerely,

Susanne P. Jordan  
Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations  
UNCG, School of Education  
(H) 299-4999

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full name) agree to participate in the research project as outlined above.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone (D) \_\_\_\_\_ (E) \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_