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If You Build It, Will They Come? an Autoethnographic Account of Starting a School and Year One

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IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?
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OF STARTING A SCHOOL
AND YEAR ONE

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of the Requirements for the Degree
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has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Program of Educational Psychology.

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ABSTRACT

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This autoethnographic research was a qualitative analysis of the process of starting a school and running it in the first year. While this research explained some of the process, it is not a guidebook for starting schools. Instead, this narrative was meant to tell about the experience in order to inspire others in education to try something new or different. The significance of the research came from the need for a change in education and the power of narrative to inspire change. Using autoethnography as my methodology and reflection and layered accounts to tell the narrative, I explored the following research questions:

> Q1   What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

> Q2   In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

> Q3   What can I learn from confronting the dilemmas that exist from my own historical experiences in education?

From this exploration, I found that by looking out into culture and looking back in, being reflective in education is essential to growth. In my reflection I learned where my points of struggle were, and ultimately what I needed to do to improve as one of the co-founders of the school. I also learned that reconciling the conflict

between the testing culture and research is incredibly difficult; writing the narrative has helped me better understand my own struggles with that reconciliation, but I have not yet learned what needs to be done to improve the system. Finally, I was able to identify the ways my own historical experiences in education have impacted my ability to change the very system I was involved in. While the desire to start a school was significant, overcoming decades of previous experience in the traditional system was more difficult than I expected.

Implications of this study are found in the narrative telling of opening and running and school in its first year. The impact of this research is meant to inspire others in education, not through providing a roadmap of that change, but by offering the research base to inspire change, paired with the narrative of what changing education looks like in action.

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I also greatly appreciate the members of my committee who have provided me this opportunity. To my chair, Dr. Marilyn Welsh, I have appreciated you allowing me the freedom to explore something that was new to us both. Thank you, Dr. Jacob Skousen, for your encouragement and for leading the way for me in qualitative research. You have been a mentor more than you know. Thank you, Dr. Kevin Pugh, for creating such a cool project that led to the school. If I had not taken your class, there

may not be a school to write about. And to Dr. Cassendra Bergstom, I have been so grateful for your positivity and encouraging words that led me to believe I could do this.

Last, and definitely not least, I am so thankful for "Michael" and "Danica." This autoethnography tells my story, but truthfully, there is no "my" story; this is our story from my lens. Without the two of them, there definitely would not have been a school to write about. I appreciate you both more than you would ever know!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rachel, my former boss from the school district, sat across from me at the restaurant playing mindlessly with her fork. "Tell me everything," she said, "I want to hear about the entire process. I remember five, no I think it was maybe even six years ago, I remember you saying that you were going to start a school, and now it's really happening." In just one hour of lunch conversation, I never got to tell Rachel everything. I probably missed even most of the highlights. But this story, this ethnographic account of our journey, this is almost everything. This is the story of how six years ago I dreamed I could possibly change one little sliver of education to make it more purposeful for children and the workplace. This is the story of how I took that dream and connected with other dreamers, and how we created our dream school together. This is the story of our trials and errors, our hiccups and celebrations, and our path to opening the doors and building the plane while flying it.

I wanted to share this story because, as I explain in the review of literature, there is plenty of evidence that public education in America needs to change, that the industrialized model of education no longer serves our students, and that America is losing ground in innovation due to our failures in educating the children of the future. I also wanted to share this because there are kids who are like my children, who have lost the love of learning because the institution we prescribe to help them learn has

destroyed that love in them with "from a box" curricula and "teacher proof" lessons. Finally, I chose to share this story because I believe change in education must start from the inside. Educators have to want to change the system and have to be willing to fight to do that.

What we learned as founders of The School of Innovation is that education will never change with district, state, national, or even corporate mandates. It will take educators finally deciding to learn and risk to do something better. We have taken that risk and while we have no idea yet if it will be better than the system that came before, at least we are trying.

Serendipity

I have referred to a lot of things during this process as serendipitous. There was no magic involved and, in a lot of instances, a lot of luck. So often I happened to either be in the right place at the right time or be offered the right opportunity at the right time. I cannot help but to think that these have all been accidental but at the same time, each occurrence of serendipity has accumulated to this moment here--where I am writing about a school that I helped create that has now opened.

When this dream began six years ago, I had nothing written down, there was no plan of action, and I had not even researched very much. I knew, though, that what I was doing as an instructional coach was not working. The more I went into classrooms trying to convince teachers to adopt more traditional methods of teaching, such as using direct instruction models, the less engagement I was seeing from teachers and students alike.

Direct instruction was the party line in the district where I worked and as an instructional coach, I was the spokesmodel for it when I was in schools. I noticed, however, that the teachers floundered as the pacing guides became more detailed to explain nearly every minute of instruction, and students who had never lived a day in a school before No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) struggled to think beyond the bubble sheet. Make no mistake, I contributed to this system. But my boss at the time, Rachel, thought beyond the system. She read literature on different modes of teaching and she believed an education system based on "hoops" that students jump through prepared them for nothing. She would have these quips like "if it's important enough to ask, it's important enough for everyone to answer," meaning that when you ask a question in a class, there should be techniques for getting all voices in the room. I stole this and taught it to every teacher with whom I interacted. I embodied it when I was modeling it in classrooms. She allowed me to experiment in classrooms with teachers and students and use the literature to find more engaging ways to bring the curriculum to life. I was growing as an educator and practitioner because I got lucky enough--in a school system of people who believed in "chain of command" and toeing the party line-- to have the one rogue boss.

By the end of my second year as an instructional coach in the school district, I was in charge of leading a team in writing the curriculum and assessments for all of the middle school English classes. I felt a great deal of pride when a sixth-grade teacher called Rachel to tell her it was the best curriculum he had worked with since he started working in the district. Rachel inspired me and pushed me to think differently about

education and then gave me the space to grow. Again, I was given an opportunity that seemed to come from nowhere but it was the beginning of my training in *Understanding by Design* curriculum writing (Wiggins, Wiggins, & McTighe, 2005). I now saw how to plan with the end in mind. I knew the standards inside and out, could quote them verbatim, and I saw how truly flexible they could be.

It was at that point I began to talk about designing a school--a place where teachers were seen as professionals, had access to new research, and were encouraged to have conversations about teaching and learning; I had experienced the impact this opportunity had on me and realized if there were a school that was based around that, the curriculum they designed would be amazing. I imagined a school where curriculum was challenging for all students, not just students in honors or Advanced Placement/ International Baccalaureate. I had imagined a school where students dealt with messy problems daily. These problems were not just categorized as mathematics, or reading, or writing, but instead integrated all subjects.

My time with district came to an end in 2013 when a full-time position opened at the University where I still teach in the School of Teacher Education. During my last year in the school district, I knew it would be time for me to leave if I had the opportunity. The district leadership team brought in a very expensive consultant to direct us in writing the middle school curriculum once again. There was no more free-reign, no more creativity, no more research-based design if the research was not directly connected to test scores. Students had not even taken the state test to see how the curriculum I wrote was working and we were onto something new. The most difficult part was that the consultant was the same person who wrote the elementary school

curriculum. She believed wholeheartedly in scripted curricula with an all-schools-on-the-same-page-same day philosophy of education. I no longer saw my school district job as a place to grow and my passion for rethinking school was beginning to become all-consuming. I needed a space to grow.

My moment came when I realized what I was doing was so far from what I believed. In the spring of 2013, I was responsible for making a color-coded Excel spreadsheet that detailed how each class of students was doing on the benchmark assessment. From this sheet I was to identify "target" teachers to work with and coach them to get higher test scores. In the fall of 2013, I began working full time at the University of Northern Colorado. While I had not really thought about pursuing my Doctor of Philosophy degree just yet, the opportunity to do so was just too convenient. A colleague of mine had just finished her first year as a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology department and encouraged me to apply to that program because she had just completed a class where the class project was to design a school. With ideas about changing education swirling in my brain full time now, this seemed like another one of those lucky opportunities I needed to explore. I used the nine credits allotted to explore coursework in Educational Psychology before applying to the program and took the class to design a school in the Spring of 2014. My partner and I worked to design the school that had been living in my head for the two or more years prior. Again, I experienced a moment of serendipity. I luckily had a partner who liked what I was thinking and allowed me to explore it. She put plenty of work into the project but also totally bought into my philosophy of education and allowed me to direct the project since she understood how serious I was about it. Getting my ideas on paper

was liberating. Much of the research and writing that went into that process was a part of our initial charter school application and is still a part of our school's innovation plan today; if I had not been given the time and space in that class, it is possible this project would still be living in my head.

When I was writing the final draft of that plan for my class, I ran into an acquaintance who asked what coursework I was working on so intently. I explained the project and my desire to bring it to life; she called her husband, Michael, over to talk with me. Michael, much like me, had been designing a school in his head for some time.

While he was not writing a paper for class, he carried around a scrap piece of paper and had been jotting down his ideas for a while. With his scrap paper in hand and my class project, we began to compare. Our ideas sounded fairly similar. Michael, much like me, had been telling others about his ideas as well and he found another educator, Danica, who wanted the same things in education as we did. By chance, the three of us found each other thinking the same things at the same time during a point in our lives when we were ready to pursue it. Albert Bandura (2006) wrote, "A seemingly insignificant fortuitous event can set in motion constellations of influences that change the course of lives" (p. 166) and our meeting was exactly this type of "fortuitous event." Michael, Danica, and I officially met for the first time on December 22, 2014.

Let's Design a School

In the Fall of 2014, my husband's school district had recently switched to Google classroom and he was obsessed with all of the features. On December 22, 2014, he urged me to open a blank Google document to record our first school meeting. At the time, I was reticent to store things in "the cloud" but the idea of sharing access was

exciting. Now I am grateful because I still have every note from every meeting from the last three years. On December 22, we gathered a small group of educators in the library, grabbed a white board, appointed someone as note taker, and opened our first official document called "Let's Design a School." The first thing we did was create a list of characteristics of our dream school on the white board, while the note taker recorded the following items:

> Project-based, problem-finding, collaboration, not exclusive, social-emotional learning, professional learning communities, teacher run, K-6 and expand up through 12, multiple ways to demonstrate learning, Tinker Time!, exploratory cross grade-level learning, short (time) learning pathways, community connection, working garden & kitchen (composting), community involvement, parent training, open work space for students, flexible structure and schedule/easy to make changes when things need adjustment (i.e., no policy committee approval needed).

Reflecting on this list, I think our first document was a testament to our core. Nearly three years since this list was written, we have stayed true to almost everything on the list--right down to the composting. The only significant difference was we were opening a K-8 instead of a K-6 and we called it Exploratory, not Tinker Time!

The remainder of our first document included a to-do list with the following: Each person finds a model school to visit, read Expeditionary Learning model, read CDE starting a charter school information, start compiling a list of people who may be resources. We used the document to record our research as we each looked into these things. On some elements of research, we were very driven as the three of us revised or modified the document 29 times in the first month. On some things, we never picked up steam, for instance, the list we created for people to sit on our steering committee was left with names but no contact information; while I eventually contacted two people on the list, neither contact was interested in what we were pursuing. As we began trying to

fulfill the requirements of starting a charter school and completing the requirements of the Colorado League of Charter Schools (2019), we quickly realized we had a lot of work to do. Of course, that seems obvious when saying, "I'm going to start a school," but we quickly realized every single thing we had to do would take at least two times longer than we thought it would take. This realization first happened when trying to write the mission statement.

Let's Design a Mission and Vision

I do not regret our process of developing a mission at all. I think it worked well and I think we developed a mission that spoke to who we are. The process, however, was a realization for us as it was the first time we said the phrase, "Let's meet for a couple of hours and finish *blank*" only to find that whatever task *blank* was could not be easily accomplished in a couple of hours and likely not even a couple of days. We continued to underestimate the time commitment on every task throughout the process and even when we tried to overestimate, we still underestimated the actual time.

To get money to pursue this project, we were eligible for a planning grant from the Colorado League of Charter Schools (2019) that helped with funding for marketing, legal fees, travel, training, etc. One of the first tasks for applying for the planning grant involved a grant document that required we include a mission, vision, and elevator pitch. While these were all important, our mission was, in my mind, still one of our greatest accomplishments. Our seminal document had our list of characteristics and our first to- do list asked us to research schools and organizations with missions that aligned with ours or that modeled something we wanted to see in education. We researched the missions for schools from Denver to San Francisco to Detroit.

After working on the mission statement every single night from January 25 until January 29, 2015, we met at my house one last time to work on it. Time was ticking on our planning grant. My husband suggested we use a program called Wordle to create the mission. We were struggling to hone in on everything we wanted in our educational model into a concise statement and he thought this might do the trick. We took the mission statements that inspired us and our list of characteristics and plugged them into a Wordle. Wordle is an online computer program wherein you can copy and paste large chunks of text and it creates a visual image of the text. In the visual image, the words used most frequently were the largest. Some of the most frequently used words and phrases in our Wordle included

> Sense of wonder, adventure, curiosity, real tools, real materials, and real problems to encourage and engage; problem-solver; creativity and critical thinking; self- directed; collaboration; community engagement; natural inclination toward curiosity, discovery, and adventure; inclusive/diverse school/group of students; relevant self-directed, teacher-facilitated learning.

From this list, we went through the lengthy process of perseverating on every single word in the mission. Our mission statement went through many iterations but on January 31, 2015, the mission for our still unnamed school was created in collaboration with fellow educators Michael, Danica, Wayne, Marie, and me. Our mission now read:

> Children are naturally curious and creative learners. By connecting students with meaningful questions and real tools, we will foster an atmosphere where risk- taking and curiosity are encouraged, and students are empowered to become problem-finders and problem-solvers. We will nurture each student's character development and inspire a sense of social responsibility by creating local partnerships that allow students to engage with their community.

The five days we spent working on the mission seemed ridiculous early on. With a timetable of 18 months, we did not have five days to spend writing three sentences. In retrospect, though, that time investment was meaningful and will always serve as a

reminder that time investments are important for things that matter. Our mission has been our guide point when we have strayed back into the box of traditional education; it was our reminder of what we were fighting for when we lost the motivation to move forward and it has been one of the strongest marketing tools we have had.

Go Start a School!

I recently had a fellow educator say to me, "I am so inspired by you three. Most educators I know talk about starting a school, but you all just did it." While this is merely our story and I am certain it is not complete enough to serve as a guide to opening a school, I do hope it might serve as inspiration for other educators hoping to change the system from the inside out. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about me, Danica, and Michael other than a fairly solid synergy between the three of us and a good work ethic. But these are things many educators have so I would hope those educators who might happen to stumble upon this story would join the movement and become reformers as well.

The Beginning

My mentor and advisor in my undergraduate program taught me early in my program to view the modern education system as both broken and full of potential. In my first teaching methods class, I was asked to read Dewey's *The School and Society & The Child and the Curriculum* (1956) and *Democracy and Education* (1916/2008). This left me wondering why schools had not yet changed. Dewey saw the same problems in the early 20th century that we were experiencing at the start of the new millennium. In my second methods class, we read about the school's role in social justice with excerpts from

texts from Maxine Greene (1988) and Joel Spring (1998), and I noted that what they called for was far from what I was seeing in my observations.

With this foundation, I graduated from student teaching believing I could be a change agent in the American education system, but I was quickly put in my place by the magnitude of work a first-year teacher faces combined with the confinement and realities of a large school district. During my first year, I was required to use particular texts for my classes that I did not get to choose; all of the common assessments were already written (and printed) by a group of people I had never met and who had never met my students. My students were required to take standardized benchmark assessments three times a semester and my reviews were connected to how my students performed on these benchmarks and the common assessments since the state standardized test data did not come out until the following year. I realized that if I wanted to work in public education, I needed to play by the rules that created this type of structure and these rules did not allow time for being a change agent; I was too busy being in charge of test preparation.

I came to teaching as a second career and based on my previous workforce experience, it did not take long to realize these "rules" and tests being used in education were created to prepare students for one thing only: more school. I hated what I was doing in the classroom because based on my own work experience, I did not feel I was preparing my students for a world beyond school. While I had the philosophical background in Dewey (1916/2008) and Greene (1988) to realize why this was ineffective, I needed hard research and more experience in education to see what model was better and how to implement it. I spent the next 10 years of my

career and research work trying to figure out if and what in the modern education system was a problem.

The problems I began to identify stemmed from the culture of our education system and were undergirded in the following three issues: (a) modern education does not prepare students for the world they will enter, (b) research on what motivates and engages students to learn does not match how most public schools design their curriculum or instruction, and (c) most current reform attempts in education have been incremental and ineffective.

Context of the Study

While people have called for reform in education since the beginning of compulsory education, the largest push toward modern reform began with Dewey (1902) and his calls to make education more applicable to students' lives and more hands-on. Historically, education has moved through a variety of reforms, but modern reform has been situated in achievement as measured by standardized tests (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014; Robinson, 2011; Zhao, 2011). Unfortunately, many reforms have become a financial boon to corporations who see compulsory education as a never-ending supply of money with little actual results for students, i.e., three of the largest current reforms in education: charter schools, online or blended learning, and standardized testing (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014).

Charter schools were started initially by Albert Shanker a former president of the American Federation of Teachers because he saw a need in education for agility, innovation, and autonomy (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014). The belief was large school districts were too confined by bureaucracy to be innovative enough to impact change and that a

group of driven teachers would be able to start a school in collaboration with the school district that could meet the needs of students who were potentially not performing in the traditional model. Unfortunately, just a few years after coming up with the idea of charter schools, Shanker abandoned his own idea for reform. He saw that charters were not about teachers collaborating with school districts; instead, they were quickly becoming vehicles for privatization since private donors were funding many schools and many charters were being run by private for-profit organization (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014).

While in some states, for-profit charters make up only 10% of their charter schools, other states, like Michigan, have about 65% of their charters run by for-profit organizations. The impacts these for-profits have on education are vast. For example, while charters receive funding per pupil like all other schools, charters run by management organizations owe part of the per pupil funding to "manage" the school's administrative tasks. While this seems sensible since even district schools pay indirect costs to their administrative organizations, these costs are often unusually high. For instance, Eva Moskowitz (cited in Singer, 2014), an executive who manages Success Academy in New York City, earns about $500,000 per year for managing a school system with about 7,000 students while the state education commissioner makes about $212,000 to oversee 2.7 million students. People are paying taxes to fund public education but are unaware their public dollars are often being used to line the pockets of six-figure executives.

Another major reform that occurred in education stemmed from the invention of the internet with online schooling and blended learning becoming increasingly popular. While blended learning is actually a spectrum of possible instructional methods that

combine online instruction with brick and mortar education, many schools that call themselves blended learning schools deliver most of their direct instruction through online content while the teacher becomes a facilitator. During the 2013-2014 school year, 75% of schools and districts were offering some form of online or blended learning classes (Teachthought, 2017). Reform based in online and blended learning hits rather close to home when situating the context for this particular study. The school we opened as an Innovation Status school is part of the larger school district with oversight by the local school district board--not a separately appointed board. The school district in which we operate has fully embraced blended learning as integral to its future achievement and as a tool for creating measurable student growth. In the 2016-2017 school year, 17 of the district's 25 schools were listed as blended learning schools.

Blended learning in our school district has definitely been shown to impact student growth on the standardized assessment (Education Elements, 2017). However, there are also potential downsides to seeing blended learning as the answer to education's major problems. First and foremost, the major issue with blended learning is it focuses solely on growing based on discrete skills necessary to be successful on the test (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014). Blended learning is an admission in the reform movement that the 3Rs are the purpose of education. While this can be very efficient at raising test scores, the ultimate impact that blended learning has on the goal of education is yet to be seen. Very little actual research has been done thus far on the success of blended learning and that research has been inconclusive and unable to pinpoint blended learning as attributable for success outside of testing (Sparks, 2015; Strauss, 2015).

Second, Jean Twenge (2017) made an argument that happiness levels for youth have significantly decreased since the dawn of the iPhone in 2012. It is not just the impact of the iPhone itself but the increased time spent on technology, which stemmed from the invention of the device, that has left students less able to think for themselves; less secure in their own safety; less likely to take healthy, age-appropriate risks; and less likely to interact face-to-face with one another (Strauss, 2015). Blended learning is yet another way to plug students in but the impacts of blended learning on a student's happiness and ability to collaborate, communicate, create, and critically think and problem solve are also yet to be seen. Research, however, has been quite clear on the negative impacts of time on technology with the restructuring of the human brain in ways that impact memory, attention, and critical thinking (Gregoire, 2015).

Last, but certainly not least, technology has also provided another opportunity for education executives to make significant amounts of money by pitching a fix to all of education's problems. A quick scan of four large (but not the largest) digital content providers—Dreambox, Edmentum, Amplify, and Edgenuity—found these four companies combined had a total staff size of almost 2,000 employees and a total annual revenue of about $300,000,000 (Buzzfile, 2017). Money in and of itself is not inherently the problem. However, what many blended learning programs tout is success with student test scores and many of these companies have relationships with the companies making the test (i.e., Amplify has a $12.5 million contract with Smarter Balanced tests). It might be a logical leap to argue that these programs should be effective at test prep; perhaps they are impacting gains on things other than the test but without a body of research yet, it is difficult to see how. Many of the companies touting success of the online programs

make arguments that are only linked to student performance on the tests; some extend to college and career readiness but, again, only in reference to student achievement on standardized tests.

Standardized tests have also become a wave of the reform movement in education as the number of standardized tests most students take in K-12 has tripled (Robinson, 2011). School districts reported spending anywhere from $400 to $1,100 per pupil on standardized testing alone, meaning a school of 700 students is looking at a cost of about $420,000 and this just covers assessments and preparation (Strauss, 2015). The financial cost can be even steeper when we start to add in curriculum costs that are proven to show success on the tests, subscriptions to digital content aligned to the test, and intervention teachers who spend time drilling and killing basic test skills to help students make growth (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014; Strauss, 2015). That said, there are even greater costs than just dollars.

In a report from the American Federation of Teachers, Nelson (2013) found schools spend anywhere from 60 to 110 hours in testing and test preparation. These numbers could equate to over a full month of school focused just on the standardized test. Students lose a full month of actual instruction and time spent building skills in collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity to prepare for a test. With so much time and money spent on tests, the logic would then follow that success on the test must lead to success beyond the test but research is beginning to indicate student success on standardized tests is only showing students are getting better at taking standardized tests (Wongupparaj, Kumari, & Morris, 2014). While the number of standardized tests in K-12 is increasing, the use for them beyond K-12 is decreasing. In

fact, more than 990 colleges do not require the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT) scores as part of admission including Bowdoin, Sarah Lawrence, George Washington, and many other top tier universities because the College Board has admitted the SAT is no better a predictor of student achievement in college than class rank and high school grade point average (Sheffer, 2014). Furthermore, grades and involvement in activities that help develop work ethic and collaboration in high school are found to be better indicators of success for students in college than standardized tests. Since standardized tests are not predictors of later achievement and really only measure success in test taking, standardized tests seem to serve only one purpose in schools--a tool for accountability.

In a speech to Columbia University, Pasi Sahlberg said, "Accountability is something that is left when responsibility has been subtracted" (n.p.). Sahlberg (2011) warned that the American obsession with accountability and competition is the problem with American schools and does not lead to success of the schools. An example of how the accountability movement has hindered and not improved American education can be found in the Program for International Assessment (PISA; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008) test. This test, unlike the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2015), Smarter Balanced (2018), or the SAT (cited in Sheffer, 2014), asks students to demonstrate life skills and higher-level problem-solving skills to be successful. Despite more accountability than ever before in American schools (Ravitch & Kohn, 2014), more programs that prepare students for American standardized tests, and more time spent in test preparation and on core content and skills, students are still performing just at or below the middle of the pack for countries in the Organization

for Economic Cooperation and Development. American students' scores on the 2015 mathematics test plummeted to their lowest score ever with all other tests showing no statistically significant change since the first test ever administered (Serino, 2017).

This ethnographic study is situated in this context of education reform--a time in American society when innovation must happen outside the confines of the school district, when schools must chase success on the standardized test (even if that means plugging technology obsessed kids in for up to 50% of the day), and higher levels of accountability for everyone involved is the norm. As a person who went into education to impact change, it has been painful to feel like my efforts for change were futile and that most of what I was seeing in reform was so disconnected from what many believe to be the purpose of education. This autoethnography is one account of an experience of trying to fight against a system of standardized education to create a school that fits with what research, theorists, and educational philosophers argue about learning and the purpose of school. The narrative here is situated in a context in which high standards for education are measured only in a student's ability to read, write, and do math, while society counts on education to serve a greater purpose (Robinson, 2011). The conflict that exists between these two issues (standardization and society's needs) was the context in which our school was created and on which the research here was based.

Significance of Study

The significance of this autoethnographic study was grounded in both the desire for personal transformation and systemic transformation. Boyd (1991) stated that a personal transformation is about "making public...the historical dimensions of our dilemma...and confronting it as a difficulty to be worked through" (p. 98). As an

educator, I have 13 years of teaching in the traditional system, all post-NCLB (2002), and as a student, I have 13 years of schooling in a traditional system. Significant pieces of this research involved me making public our experience confronting the dilemmas created by our own historical experiences in education.

The systemic transformation that occurred stemmed from the transformative learning that develops through subjective reframing. The biggest struggle I faced as one of the founders stemmed from my assumptions about the system of education and what I believed to be valued. To move beyond those assumptions and into a place of real change, I challenged them through critical reflection in identifying and analyzing the tensions that arose; additionally, I engaged in the reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000) that occurred by sharing this narrative in the form of autoethnography.

However, as Baumgartner (2012) argued, these might not be enough to create social change as action and experience are also essential. For this reason, autoethnography was the perfect medium for exploring this as it allowed me as a researcher to engage in critical reflection and reflective discourse through sharing my active experiences (Gambrell, 2016).

Problem Statement

Exactly those issues mentioned in my introduction led me to want to change the system. Opening a school was an answer to what impact I could have in education and this autoethnography was an exploration of that experience. It chronicled how it happened and identified my struggles to guide our staff to fight the pressures of standardization to truly meet the needs of students. Several schools are now paving the way in this new type of reform but even as I attempted to be a reformer who did

not see standardized testing as the target, I found myself looking to see how these schools were performing on the state tests as a means of determining if their models were worth following. As the literature on education reform continues to grow, it was essential to add to this body by chronicling what we as reformers faced in our endeavors.

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to describe the research I used and the experiences I had as I attempted to reform public education. While many aspects of this process have been foundational to learning about educational change, at this stage, the research and the process were generally limited to describing the obstacles, successes, and questions we faced while trying to reform during an era of standards-driven education.

Research Questions

Q1   What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

Q2   In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

Q3   What can I learn from confronting the dilemmas that exist from my own historical experiences in education?

Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is so much more than personal narrative as it involves both the telling of the personal story but situates these stories in cultural, social, and political implications, meanings, and *evocative potential* (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2010). The goal of autoethnography is a reciprocal and constant back-and-forth with the researcher looking out into culture and then critically looking inward

into one's own actions and response (Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This back-and-forth is grounded in the very definition of autoethnography as *graphy* is the description and analysis, *auto* is the personal experiences, and *ethno* is understanding the cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography is subjective in nature in that the stories are told through the lens of the researcher who is also a part of the culture being studied (Ellis et al., 2011). Furthermore, autoethnography is a move away from quantitative research--instead of being value-free, it is value-centered (Bochner, 1994). A move toward value-centered research stems from the belief that values and stories offer evidence as much as data might (Bochner, 1994) and stories generate empathy and a move from identity politics in a way other research might not (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

First and foremost, I recognized that using my story of trying to impact educational change from the inside was non-unique. An analysis of the mountains of quantitative data of others who have tried new and innovative pedagogical techniques might have produced results that could be useful to others ready to begin this journey. However, for me, it has always been the narratives that inspired me and the other founders to move forward even when it felt futile in the system; I wanted to be a part of that narrative that sparked others to want to improve the system. For us, it was Gever Tulley's (2008) description of starting Brightworks Academy in the *TEDxBloomington* speech that reminded me of our role as educators. This inspiration did not come from data or hard facts; it came from watching him encourage students to learn about electricity by licking 9-Volt batteries because curiosity and play were at the center of his educational philosophy. These stories drove me to want to change

education to embrace curiosity in education. While the data and hard facts about motivation were also helpful in shaping my view, it was not Deci and Ryan or Linnenbrink-Garcia that made me want to change the system to embrace a more project-based model. It was Ted Dintersmith's (2015) story of High Tech High's move to project-based learning in the documentary *Most Likely to Succeed* that helped me see that not only should it happen but it was happening and was possible.

While the *why* and *what* for changing education were often grounded in the research and my own experience in the system, the *how* came from the narratives. The narratives of those who have come before us provided a vicarious experience (Bandura, 1977) that allowed us to turn our *why* into a *how*. Stake (1994) contended that generalizability in autoethnography occurred when the reader responded to the story as though he or she had experienced it (a vicarious experience) and Denzin (2013) said "The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action" (p. 70). Additionally, science shows narrative to actually be more effective in convincing others than data and hard facts since brain research shows narratives engage parts of the brain as though the individual is experiencing the event his/herself and because evolutionarily we are wired for storytelling (Sapolsky, 2010; Simony et al., 2016). My personal goal as an educational researcher has always been to move other educators into "ethical action." Thus, based on the research about how the human brain processes narrative and how I was personally motivated into action, autoethnography seemed to be the best method to meet my intended goals for researching. Through this autoethnography, I hoped to provide a vicarious experience to others who might have theoretical- or research-based reasons to want to change the

education system but perhaps did not have a model with which they identified or might need another example in order to take action.

While some question autoethnography as a valid research methodology because of its subjectivity, no research is wholly objective (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis et al., 2011), and if it were wholly objective and generalizable, most research (quantitative or qualitative) would not yield the same results when replicated. Instead, autoethnography embraces and owns its subjectivity and the researcher's personal impact on the results (Ellis et al., 2011). It was in the honesty that admits "this is how things worked for me" and recognizes that the researcher has an influence on the results that made autoethnography a valid form of research for trying to generalize something as messy and with as many variables as education reform.

Summary

This autoethnography is a written journey of founding a school and reflecting on the process in the context of modern education reform. In this research and the narrative, I share what this context is, the research underpinnings for the creation of the school, the narrative experience of opening the school and year one, and the dillemas I faced as being both a product of and player in the very system I was attempting to change. The purpose of this story is to undertand and analyze those dillemas in the context of both the standardization movement and within the culture of education.

The theoretical framework for this research is grounded in postmodern interpretivism, which allows for personal reflection and cultural analysis. The methodological approach of autoethography was chosen as it provided the best

approach to share the narrative experience meant to inspire, as well as explore the personal dillemas faced in education reform.

In the literature review provided in Chapter II, I delve into the research base behind the purpose of education, modern education reform, and the current needs in education. Additinally, I explain the research base for using autoethnographic vignettes as a tool for reflexivity in research. This chapter is an example of the process and product that is central to postmodern interpretivism in autoethnographic research because the research serves as both the foundation of the school, and the tool for being reflective and analyzing within the autoethnographic research.

Chapter III provides the methodology used by detailing the process of selecting, collecting, and analyzing data sources; looking at researcher stance and positionality; describing the setting; and looking at reliability, generalizability, and validity. Additionally, Chapter III provides an explanation of limitations in the research.

The vignettes in Chapter IV are the narrative data that are central to the narrative base of the autoethnography. These vignettes are the written, narrative representations of the data collected. The vignettes are a combination of reflexive accounts and layered accounts of the experience of starting a school and year one.

The conclusion in Chapter V summarizes the findings, while also connecting the various vignettes to the research questions. In this chapter, I provide an analysis of the research questions by providing the connection between the vignettes and the research. The discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research are also explored in Chapter V.

Definition of Terms

Blended learning. A combination of digital content with traditional classroom instruction.

Blended learning school. A school where some or most of the content is delivered through technology and the teacher facilitates the learning in a brick and mortar setting. Occasionally, blended learning schools only require partial attendance in the brick and mortar setting and it becomes a "blend" of online schooling at home and traditional schooling in the building.

Brick and mortar school. A school that uses in-person learning to deliver instruction.

Charter school. A publicly funded school that is often started by teachers, parents, or community members and is chartered either by the school district or a state or national granting authority. Often free from district regulations and operate with their own school board that is separate from district schools.

Collaborator. Name for the educator in a band. (i.e., teacher).

Education reform. The goal of changing public education.

Exploratory. A time of day where students get to explore classes that are not offered in traditional school (i.e., fencing, music production, sewing, kung fu, etc.).

Groups. A group of students within three grade levels of each other. Whereas most schools have one class of students within one year, a band spans grade level.

Innovation school. A school that has the same waivers as a charter but is part of the local public-school system. Innovation schools do not have separate school boards but operate under the same school board as other district schools.

Loop. An instructional unit tied together by a theme.

Online school. A school that offers all curriculum and instruction online to students.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When we started researching for the School of Innovation just over three years ago, I could not fathom the journey we were about to begin. I had been a product of the system I was attempting to reform and I had been taught to teach in the system I was attempting to reform. Because of these experiences, I was frequently in a state of cognitive dissonance. What I was reading and learning did not fit with what I had experienced or even how I taught. In this chapter, I explore the research base that helped to inform the school depicted in the vignettes to follow. The research bolstered the narrative about what is needed in education reform and why while the narrative serves as the how. The research was grounded in the following:

- The purpose of education

- Motivation theory

- The focus of school reform

- Autoethnographic vignettes as a vehicle for reflexivity

The Purpose of Education

I always reminded the preservice teachers in the secondary education program where I teach that the point of school is not school. My goal in this reminder was to let them know that we are preparing students for a world that exists outside of the school walls and with functions entirely separate from what might happen in school. According

to Harvard professor, Michael Edwards (2014), "American schools are training kids for a world that doesn't exist" (p. 1). Dintersmith (2015), an educational philanthropist and change-agent behind the educational documentary *Most Likely to Succeed,* expanded on this concern in his documentary and advocates for school reform when he said:

> Having spent my thirty-year career as an entrepreneur and as a venture capitalist, I know what skills will be valued in the 21st Century – innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, complex problem-solving, productive collaboration, sound decision-making, passion, and grit. And when I see how kids are being educated in America today, I'm shocked. The very capabilities our kids desperately need for their future are nowhere on the radar screen in US classrooms. Worse yet, we're crushing these characteristics out of our kids, as schools place increasing priority on rote memorization, superficial learning, and teaching to increasingly-ubiquitous high-stakes tests. (n.p.)

Michael Edwards and Ted Dintersmith were not alone. Philosophers, chief finance officers, philanthropists, psychologists, researchers, and educators are all calling for change in education to better prepare students for the needs of the modern world. The National Education Association (NEA, 2010) put out a report entitled *Preparing 21st Century Students for a Global Society* wherein it identified the *4 C's* to a 21st century education: critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation. Despite being nearly 20% of the way into the 21st century, these four things tended to be absent from the majority of schools and classrooms and when they were present, they seemed to only exist in a separate part of the school day combined with very traditional models during the remainder of the day. While digital technology has changed nearly everything, it has not changed what is being taught in school--only the delivery method of what is taught; this will not better prepare students for the future. Robinson and Aronica (2015) argued, "The old systems of education were not designed with this world in mind. Improving them by raising conventional

standards will not meet the challenges we now face" (xxiii). While much of education reform up to this point has been about raising traditional standards with a sprinkling of the 4 Cs of 21st century learning (NEA, 2010), forward thinking change in education cannot be about teaching old standards more efficiently or effectively. Instead, it needs to consider changing the standards of what schools consider to be education.

Because we need to shift our thinking from a place of finding jobs to creating jobs (Zhao, 2010), it is a critical time in society; as educators, it is crucial that we give students the skills to operate as problem-solvers and entrepreneurs in this quickly changing world. The World Economic Forum (cited in Schwab, 2012) stated this is the most important time for entrepreneurship as the driving force for growth and societal progress and change in education is also essential to "employment generation and social empowerment" (p. xiii). Much like the current model of education that was created during the Industrial Revolution to produce factory workers, our new model of education must meet current and future demands of the workforce to prepare students to be innovative entrepreneurs who can solve future problems and do jobs that computer technology cannot (Zhao, 2012).

Much of education reform seems to be shaped by the lens of the purpose of education. With that, a great deal of conflicting research exists. For instance, John Hattie (2017) published a list of factors that influence student achievement based on a mega- analysis of research literature including 800 meta-analyses. His list puts many of the core elements of our school in the category of small effect size especially when you look at them in comparison to some more traditional instructional models. For instance, open classrooms have a $d = .01$, student control of learning has a $d = .02$, and multi-age

classrooms has a d = .04. Some of the elements of our model have a medium effect, like mindfulness with a d = .29 or student-centered teaching with a d = .36, but these are much smaller effects than direct instruction with a d = .60 or rehearsal and memorization with a d = .73.

I have on multiple occasions heard school administrators and district leaders cite these effect sizes and Hattie's (2017) *hinge point* of an effect size of d = .40 as the reason to use or not use certain models in their schools. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) even wrote a book explaining how to implement Hattie's research in literacy instruction called *Visible Learning for Literacy*. Mansell (2008) called Hattie's study "education's equivalent to the search for the Holy Grail--or the answer to life, the universe and everything…[he] has the ear of governments everywhere" (p. 1). In education, most decision makers have accepted Hattie's effect sizes as the gold standard for good teaching and they can even attend the "Visible Learning Conference" to get up to date on the biggest effects to student achievement.

Knowing about these effect sizes and the importance educational experts put on it makes it difficult sometimes not to embrace the traditional model since it is evidenced to have the greatest impact on learning. However, when researching for the school, I learned there were also some significant flaws in Hattie's (2017) research. As Zhao (2018) explained in his book *What Works May Hurt: Side Effects in Education*, there could be some serious "side effects" to implementing Hattie's research, not to mention there seemed to be significant flaws in his research. Even Hattie himself said it was more nuanced than the mere effect sizes. For instance, he said the effect sizes only

measured for outcomes on testing and that testing was not the sole purpose of education.

Additionally, Zhao (2018) cited multiple researchers and statisticians who found significant issues with Hattie's methodology, going as far as calling his research a pseudoscience. Zhao's main concern though was the *side effects*. The main side effect he was most concerned about was the impact that implementing what Hattie reported to be the most effective would have on innovation. With Hattie's (2017) research, the main outcome measured was standardized test scores. Zhao thought the United States was in trouble if better test scores became the driving force for instruction. Zhao shared that China, for instance, was on track to have an Industrial Revolution in the 1400s when the rest of the now-modern world was still experiencing the Dark Ages. However, it was at that time that China introduced its first educational standardized exam. While the exam improved educational quality, it homogenized society in such a way that innovation stalled.

The conflicting philosophies existed here because the purpose of education was unclear. Hattie (2017) showed great results but this was when the purpose was student achievement, specifically achievement on tests. Zhao (2018) argued that following Hattie would have social repercussions, as we have always been a nation of innovation, while nations focused on achievement have rarely been anything but a nation of high test scores.

Motivation Theory and Education

Multiple theories fit under the larger construct of motivation theory. While reviewing the literature in my educational psychology courses and comparing it

with what I was observing in modern day traditional schools, I began to notice that public education, as many of Americans have experienced and are experiencing it, was not congruent with research on what motivated people to learn. What follows below are a few examples of where research on learning and motivation were misaligned but it is by no means a comprehensive review of all of the misalignments between motivation literature and modern education.

An Agentic Perspective

While social cognitive theory stemmed from animal research in the 1930s (Holt & Brown, 1931), Bandura (1977) expanded on their understanding of animal behavior into a realm that has informed and even shaped ideas in education with his research and philosophies around self-efficacy with regard to social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory at its most simplistic core is the belief that learning occurs through observing models (Bandura, 1986; Holt & Brown, 1931; Miller & Dollard, 1941). Bandura (2006) further argued, "Social cognitive theory adopts an agentic perspective toward human development, adaptation, and change" (p. 164). An agentic perspective is one in which a person has the ability to influence his/her own choices and that by nature "people are self-organizing, self-regulating, and self-reflecting individuals" (Bandura, 2006, p. 164). Agency does not merely mean a person only pursues his or her own desires whenever and however he or she pleases; rather, Bandura (2006) stated that agency is comprised of the following four properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. These properties as part of the larger theory, social cognition, take into account prosocial behavior functions such as meeting other people's needs, planning and goal setting, self-regulation, and reflection.

Modern education by design minimizes student agency by creating all of the structures, models of thinking, and standards students must follow for everything; in essence, teachers and the school system attempt to serve as the child's executive functioning (EF) system, thus weakening their agency. To define this problem, I first define EF, then make a link between EF and agency/self-efficacy, then explain why strong EF and agency are imperative to motivation and learning, and finally identify which features of the school system minimize these abilities and natural desires in students. In addition, I recognize the ways in which schools have minimized opportunities for students to develop agency and build EF skills.

While there is no formally agreed upon definition for the construct of EF, most researchers in the field agreed executive functioning is a set of processes comprised of the following features: inhibitory control, attention shifting, working memory, goal directed behavior, planning, and monitoring (Barkley, 1997; Miyake et al., 2000; Welsh & Pennington, 1988; Zelazo & Müller, 2002). Based on these features and functions, there is a great deal of crossover between the four properties of agency and the features that comprise EF. For example, while Bandura (2006) defined *intentionality* as "having action plans and strategies for realizing them" (p. 164), *goal-directed behavior* in EF is having relevant goals, planning how to achieve them, and carrying out the actions (Granpeesheh, 2014). Bandura's (2006) definition of *forethought* was that a person's behavior is driven by anticipated outcomes while *planning* in EF is the "ability to organize cognitive behavior in time and space" (Owen, 1997, p. 431); planning is one's ability to think about the future. Furthermore, Bandura (cited in Eslinger, 1996) defined *self-reactiveness* as a form of self-regulation and defined *self-reflectiveness* as the skill

of metacognition while in EF, *inhibitory control* is the term for self-regulation and

monitoring is the function for metacognition. While I was unable to find a connection in

research between the construct of EF and agency, the definitional similarities between

the properties of these two highly researched constructs suggested the connection

between EF and a person's agency. Furthermore, Welsh and Schmitt-Wilson's (2013)

research on EF and career-decision making demonstrated a link between EF and

identity, and identity is foundational to the larger theory of social-cognition (Padilla &

Perez, 2003).

       The implications for looking at research on EF in education are vast because

while much of brain development occurs before the age of eight, a large body of

research using fMRI imaging of the prefrontal cortex and EF tasks (Stroop, Tower of

Hanoi, Stop- Signal, or Go-No-Go) shows EF continues to develop beyond early

childhood (Best & Miller, 2010; Brocki & Bohlin, 2004; Casey et al., 1997; Cragg &

Nation, 2008; Johnstone et al., 2007; Jonkman, 2006; Somsen, 2007; Williams, Ponesse,

Schachar, Logan, & Tannock, 1999). In fact, Huizinga, Dolan, and van der Molen

(2006) found scores on the Stroop task continued to improve until the age of 21 and

electroencephalogram data brain activity recorded during tasks requiring EF showed

localized responses in the brain in the prefrontal cortex region developing all the way

into early adulthood (Best & Miller, 2010; Jonkman, 2006). Because EF is still so

pliable during school age years and EF skills are so closely linked to school and career

success (Clark, Pritchard, & Woodward, 2010; Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012; Welsh &

Schmitt- Wilson, 2013), it was imperative to look at what schools could do to help

strengthen EF and whether or not current programs in schools did anything to stunt the development of strong EF and student agency.

A myriad of research interventions showed EF could be strengthened in individuals (Diamond, 2012; Kray, Karbach, Haenig, & Freitag, 2012) and literature from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2014) suggested building EF could be done by shifting the child away from adult regulation in tasks starting as early as ages three to five while simultaneously increasing the complexity of tasks. Other activities and skills that helped to strengthen EF were creative play and social activities, exercise, and opportunities for directing his/her own actions with decreasing adult supervision (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2014). The need for EF teaching in American schools is increasing due to a rapidly increasing number of students coming from poverty who are lacking EF skills from their home environment (Tough, 2016); however, opportunities to develop EF through creative play, exercise, social skill development, and decreased adult supervision with scaffolding have diminished in many traditional schools.

Many factors have led to our modern system of education failing students in providing opportunities to develop agency and EF. First, American schools have changed very little since the Industrial Revolution and were primarily created to train citizens for factory work and following basic directions (Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Zhao, 2012). While this served factory workers well at the time, it was not a system designed with student agency in mind; it was actually designed to eliminate agency because workers in a factory did not need agency--they needed to follow directions. Additionally, the "zero-tolerance" movement for behavior that arose out of the 1980s

and early 1990s in the United States was designed to mitigate behaviors that were not "school-appropriate" but also led to a system that punished many students with poor EF skills and a lack of self-efficacy and agency instead of teaching them those skills (Tough, 2016); high suspension rates and a lack of services for children with low EF have been detrimental in preparing the neediest students for a world outside of school. Finally, accountability, standards, and subsequent testing movements that arose out of No Child Left Behind Act (2002) ultimately led to significantly increased testing as students went from taking just six tests during their K-12 careers to a minimum of 14 tests; this did not include tests administered by school districts to predict how students would do on higher stakes tests (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Because of increased testing, schools experienced significant decreases in time spent on the arts, social studies, science, physical education, recess, and play in kindergarten and early elementary (McMurrer, J., & Kober, 2007) the exact elements of education that lead to growth in EF and agency development. Combining all of these factors together, classrooms are now more focused on bell-to-bell instruction--and in elementary grades specifically in reading and math-- than they are in preparing students to develop skills linked to success in adulthood.

The problem with much of modern schooling and education reform, however, is it has eliminated opportunities to practice student agency and hence development of strong EF skills; it does not inherently value social cognition. Bandura (2006) questioned non- agentic theories of behavior because they followed a model of "bottom-up causation" in which "the environment acts on the biological machinery" (p. 167). Schools are designed in this exact manner. For example, take a term common in schools

and teacher preparation programs: *classroom management*. The word "management" alone speaks to a boss-employee relationship that stemmed from the industrial model of education.

Definitions of the word *management* ("Management," 2017) include "be in charge of" or "administer and regulate" (Def. 1). This does not merely imply that someone else regulates your behavior and actions and controls the environment but it is in fact the actual function of the word's meaning.

This extends into the classroom when looking at how the full-term *classroom management* is defined. The online Glossary of Education Reform (2014) defined it as "the wide variety of skills and techniques that *teachers use* to keep students organized, orderly, focused, attentive, on task, and academically productive during a class" (p. 1) Whereas, the teacher modules on the website for the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) defined classroom management as "the process by *which teachers and schools create and maintain* appropriate behavior of students in classroom settings" (p.1). In both of these definitions, the *teacher* is the one who creates order and controls the environment, attention, organizational structure, and productivity in the classroom. There was no room in these definitions for the type of student agency that could help build EF, such as shifting the child away from adult regulation in tasks, since a common aspect of teacher preparation and practicing teacher training looks specifically at *classroom management* as a means of managing and directing student behavior. Furthermore, these definitions ignored the fact that students are sentient beings who act on their environment; as Bandura (2006) said, "They create it, preserve it, transform it, and even destroy it, rather than merely react to it as a given" (p. 167).

Asking teachers to practice great classroom management ignores agency, attempts to remove this natural human function of agency from the student, and minimizes the ability for a student to learn to regulate him/herself.

Agency is not just ignored in the way classrooms are managed but also in the development of curriculum and modes of instruction. Bandura (2006) argued that the "human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive" and "Consciousness is the substance of mental life" (p. 167). However, he also stated that when humans do not have opportunities to engage in "deliberative and reflective conscious activities, [they] are simply mindless automatons" as the "functional aspect of consciousness involves purposefully accessing and deliberately processing information for selecting, constructing, regulating, and evaluating courses of action" (p. 167). An example of students becoming mindless automatons who do not have the opportunity to generate, create, plan, and reflect, and, therefore, lack motivation, can best be seen in the example of what has happened to kindergarten in schools in the United States.

In America, we have undergone a significant change in kindergarten classrooms. Research showed that in all-day kindergarten, children faced about two to three hours of direct instruction in literacy and math and about 30 minutes of free play or choice (Miller & Allmon, 2009). Additionally, much of the literacy and math instruction was delivered in the form of non-negotiable, scripted curricula focused on meeting standards of state testing; teachers were often made to spend 20-30 minutes each day on standardized test preparation (Miller & Allmon, 2009). Very little time was built in for socialization and play. However, in a meta-analysis of research, Singer and Singer (1990) found play is essential in early childhood development because it helps children

expand vocabulary and link objects with actions, develop object constancy, form event schemas and scripts, learn strategies for problem-solving, develop divergent thinking ability, and develop a flexibility in shifting between different types of thought (narrative and logical). (p. 33)

Elias and Berk (2002) also found complex sociodramatic play predicted improvement in self-regulation, especially for children who were highly impulsive. Learning complex vocabulary, problem-solving, flexibility, shifting between different types of thought, and self-regulation are all imperative skills to embracing agency and building EF; the opportunity to learn these skills is disappearing from the very place they were once practiced: kindergarten. Eliminating these skills in our current education system becomes problematic because play is paramount to developing the skills kindergartners need to be successful in and out of school. Furthermore, eliminating these is actually detrimental to the very skills (literacy & numeracy) they are trying to improve as Shonkoff, Duncan, Fisher, Magnuson, and Raver (2011) cited a body of research that showed strong EF and self-regulation positively predicted literacy and numeracy skills.

Evidence of the negative impacts of changing kindergarten to a more academic focus was found in research from Germany in the 1970s. During that time, German schools moved away from play-based kindergarten into academically-focused kindergarten to meet increased demands brought on by education reform. Researchers compared the outcomes of 50 play-based kindergartens to 50 achievement-based kindergartens and found that by the age of 10, students who attended play-based kindergartens performed better in reading and mathematics, demonstrated higher levels of creativity and intelligence as well as social and emotional adjustment, and displayed better language skills and agency (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 1992). These effects were far reaching because

while many politicians and policymakers are calling for even more tests, more accountability, and more hard-core academics in early childhood classrooms, the leaders of major business corporations are saying that creativity and play are the future of the U.S. economy. (Miller & Allmon, 2009, p. 12)

The current structure of kindergarten is used here simply as an example to demonstrate how the culture of the modern education system diminished creativity and agency and inhibited the development of EF; however, the vignettes in Chapter IV explore beyond kindergarten and discuss how we are attempting to build a culture that values these characteristics with the school at levels kindergarten through eighth grade.

Modern Schooling Ignores the Links: Emotions, Engagement, and Achievement

Much like EF, engagement is a construct that does not have one agreed upon definition. Regardless of a lack of definition, it is widely accepted that student engagement is a multidimensional construct with strong links to motivation (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) expanded on the three categories of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) by posing five categories of engagement:

> cognitive (attention and memory processes), motivational (intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, achievement goals), behavioral (effort and persistence), cognitive-behavioral (strategy use and self-regulation), and social-behavioral (social on-task behavior). (p. 259)

This expanded framework allowed engagement theorists to recognize the impact of peers in social-behavioral engagement or to make clearer links to effort and persistence in terms of behavior.

Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) defined emotions as "a multifaceted phenomenon involving sets of coordinated psychological processes, including affective,

cognitive, physiological, motivational, and expressive components" (p. 260). In this definition, the authors took into account the complexity of emotions by identifying how emotions impacted the mind, body, and behavioral responses Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia made the link from emotions to engagement to academic achievement by positing that engagement is "a mediator between students' emotions and achievement" (p. 264). This claim was supported in a body of research that showed strong links between emotions and motivation in attribution theory, control-value theory, expectancy-value theory, achievement goal theories, and literature on effort and self-regulation (Liu, Cheng, Chen, & Wu, 2009; Lovejoy & Durik, 2010; Pekrun, 2006; Peterson & Schreiber, 2006; Shell & Husman, 2008). The following is how Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia demonstrated the research base to support the impact of emotions on the five categories of engagement and subsequently social and academic success:

Cognitive Engagement

Positive and negative emotions both increase resource consumption but research on negative emotions showed they were more closely linked with task-irrelevant thinking, decreased working memory capacity, reduced flow, and negative attentional engagement; positive emotions are linked to task-related thinking, increased working memory capacity, a state of flow, and attentional engagement (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Motivational Engagement

Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) found emotions are related to mastery-approach goals with positive emotions leading to the adoption of mastery-approach goals while negative emotions do not. Additionally, research showed positive emotions

were linked to higher levels of interest and intrinsic motivation while negative emotions related negatively to interest and intrinsic motivation.

Behavioral Engagement

Emotions have been shown to have an impact on the amount of effort a student exudes and the level of persistence with which he/she is willing to engage in difficult tasks. While there is no consensus on why this occurs, it is widely accepted that activating positive emotions, such as enjoyment, are positively linked to effort and persistence and negative activating emotions, such as hopelessness and boredom, are negatively linked to effort and persistence (Ainley, 2006; Helmke & van Aken, 1995; Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Cognitive-Behavioral Engagement

Cognitive-behavioral engagement is separate from the automatic processes of cognitive engagement as it is focused on the more complex cognitive processes of metacognition and problem-solving. In the research linked to these complex processes, positive emotions were connected to "flexible, creative, and holistic ways of solving problems and a reliance on generalized, heuristic knowledge structures" (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012, p. 267) while negative emotions were more strongly linked to detail-oriented, analytical, and rigid ways of thinking (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). While the rigid and analytical approach was not maladaptive and was useful for school-related tasks such as rehearsing learning and recall, the flexible approach might be a necessary component to meta-strategies such as self-awareness strategies (metacognition, meta- motivation, and metaemotion) and self-regulation (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

However, research was still not clear on the direction of the relationship between positive emotions and use of meta-strategies and self-regulation.

Social-Behavioral Engagement

Social-behavioral engagement is comprised of prosocial behaviors that involve interactions in learning necessary to make for successful group cohesion (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012): positive sharing, active listening, contributing to group cohesion, and supporting others. Research was still somewhat vague on the direct impact of emotions on social-behavioral engagement because of the complexity of human interactions but mounting evidence has begun to suggest that positive emotions support social-behavioral engagement, and negative emotions compromise social-behavioral engagement (Crook, 2000; Denzin, 1984; Do & Schallert, 2004; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Rogat, & Koskey, 2011)

Theories and research about what motivates students to learn, about what impacts student development in school-based learning, and what positively affects the skills necessary for a happy and productive post kindergarten-12 life should be at the heart of any education reform in modern education. Research was clear that students with strong executive functioning and agency did better both inside and outside of school. Students who experienced play-based and social-based early childhood schooling had greater academic and non-academic success than students who experienced more rigorous early childhood schooling. Positive emotions were linked to all five categories of engagement and meeting a student's emotional needs would help prepare them better for learning.

While this research was fairly conclusive and was tested time and time again in various forms of research studies, education reform has hardly budged; the most recent changes appear to be in complete contrast to the research, so where is the disconnect?

What are Schools Missing?

Recognizing the literature about how student engagement was a mediator between emotions and academic achievement was essential to identifying a significant problem in the modern school system. First, this was another example of how motivational research rarely informed educational policy and practice. Second, knowing positive emotions had the ability to positively impact all five types of student engagement and improve academic achievement, it would make sense that education reform would look at support for emotional learning to improve student engagement and academic achievement.

However, when the Common Core Standards (Common Core, 2010) standards were released, there were only math and reading/writing standards along with sub-standards for science and social studies. As far as social-emotional learning was concerned, 50 states had standards for pre-kindergarten; however, pre-kindergarten was a non- compulsory grade level and many states that had publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs served 30% or less of the population. Only three states had adopted social- emotional standards for the compulsory grades--kindergarten-12 (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2016). While standards were not always enough to change how and what was taught, they highlighted what policymakers deemed most important in education. The Common Core standards were an indicator that policymakers believed math and reading and writing were the goal of

education, science and social studies were secondary, and arts and emotional well-being were inconsequential.

A lack of focus on the emotional learning and health of students is problematic. As of 2013, a majority (51%) of students in American schools were identified as "low income," and in some states that number is as large as 70% (Layton, 2015). Evidence suggested students from poverty were significantly more likely to experience "toxic stress" (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2014, p. 1) and negative emotions such as anxiety and depression (APA, 2017; Franke, 2014; Tough, 2016).

When coupling the large percentage of students from poverty with the impacts of emotions and EF on school engagement and academic achievement, it seemed plausible that emotional health could be one of the reasons a child from poverty was four-and-a- half times more likely to drop out of school (NCES, 2008) and that even with a more defined standards movement, the achievement gap has hardly moved, especially for students of color.

While planning to meet the needs of students' emotional health could potentially help close the achievement gap for students from poverty, the links to academic achievement were not just for students from poverty since the emotional health of today's students is on the decline. One of four adolescents reported having anxiety, which has become the most common mental health disorder in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). With increases in academic rigor and standards in core subjects all the way down to kindergarten; decreases in PE, recess, art, music, and health education; less time spent in socializing or free choice in school; less autonomy inside and outside of school; and more time spent on technology and social

media (Twenge, 2017), it seemed almost expected that students would face near epidemic levels of anxiety. Furthermore, all of the systems (physical education, the arts, recess, free choice socialization, and independence) research said might mitigate stress and anxiety are disappearing from schools while students face increasing internalized anxiety from unrealistic expectations they set for themselves based on what they saw in social media and higher rates of poverty-induced toxic stress.

Teachers and school leaders are beginning to see the need for improved emotional education and resources to help support students and many schools are implementing effective programs; yet, there are still many programs in which implementation comes in the form of structures that actually undermine the agentic nature of self-efficacy and emotion regulation (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). For instance, anxiety is often caused by being unsure of how to deal with uncertainty and discomfort and is a natural response all humans experience (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). Schools are now beginning to utilize 504 plans and programs that actually eliminate uncertainty and discomfort from the school environment (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). Per accommodations in 504 plans, students identified as having anxiety are receiving accommodations that allow them reprieve from any situation that might spark anxiety. This potentially sends a message to the student that he/she does not have the ability to handle situations that make them uncertain or uncomfortable, reducing their self-efficacy and agency, or that anxiety is always out of their control or is an unnatural emotion (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). In no way am I claiming anxiety is not real or does not deserve accommodations; instead, I suggest we need to make accommodations that support students with anxiety

to learn strategies for dealing with or overcoming anxiety and not eliminate the anxiety all together as anxiety is a natural emotion all humans experience daily.

Additionally, many emotional awareness programs utilize a process of identifying emotions but do not teach students how to recognize the physiological effects they personally experience or how to deal with the negative emotion when they are experiencing it; since fleeing the emotion is the natural response for many, schools that remove obstacles and discomfort actually reinforce in students that avoiding negative emotions is the best way to deal with them despite the fact that the world is filled with uncertainties and discomfort. This form of instruction actually teaches students maladaptive behaviors that will make life outside of school more difficult for them.

There is likely some overlap between the 25% of students dealing with anxiety and the 51% of students coming from poverty who experience toxic stress (Franke, 2014) but even so, these numbers mean that at the very least one out of four students in many school populations is coming to school with emotional needs that can impair engagement and therefore achievement.

As American education reformers look to raise standards and expectations for achievement, they must also consider what needs to change in schools to ensure students are emotionally prepared. Without that consideration, higher expectations and standards for achievement will likely result in greater student anxiety but not greater achievement. Emotional awareness and instruction in education could be the key to helping students develop stronger EF, greater levels of motivation, and higher levels of achievement.

While entire organizations like the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (2016) are working to make the research on this known, only a few states and school districts are willing to lose time from direct instruction in math and literacy to test the research in their own schools.

The Focus of School Reform

In 1938, Dewey wrote about the biggest issues with traditional models of education:

> The subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to a new generation. In the past, there have also been developed standards and rules of conduct; moral training consists in forming habits of action in conformity with these rules and standards … [T]he general pattern of school organization (by which I mean the relations of pupils to one another and to the teachers) … [centres around] time schedules, schemes of classification, of examination and promotion, of rules of order … Since the subject-matter as well as standards of proper conduct are handed down from the past, the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience. Books, especially textbooks, are the chief representatives of the lore and wisdom of the past, while teachers are the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with the material. (pp. 17-18)

Dewey argued that the problem with school was it existed to transmit the past and keep students as docile recipients of learning and not active participants. Even earlier, Dewey (1916/2008) argued, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow" (p. 167). One hundred years of progress in medicine, technology, engineering, and science has yielded remarkable change while 100 years of progress in education has yielded little more than *flexible seating* and flipped lessons (traditional content delivered electronically at home). If John Dewey were still alive, he would likely believe we are currently robbing students of tomorrow

as everything he wrote in 1938 is what is still fundamentally wrong with education today.

The main issue with current reform movements lies in the dissonance of what society defines as the purpose of school and how we administer schooling. In 2014, a survey of 875 school board members found 43% said the purpose of school was for students to fulfil their full potential, 32% said it was to prepare students for a satisfying and productive life, and just 16% said the point of school was college and career readiness (Peiffer, 2014). Despite this, since Achieve (2018), a bipartisan non-profit, began touting the phrase *College and Career Readiness*, many states have begun to adopt college and career readiness (CCR) as the sole purpose of education.

Achieve (2018) stated that "mastery of rigorous knowledge and skills in core academic disciplines" (para. 2) is the first goal of CCR and core academic disciplines start with English language arts/literacy and mathematics. Since these are the most heavily tested subjects, with tests once per year from third through 12th grade and appear to be at the core for academic disciplines, time spent teaching subjects like science, social studies, the visual and performing arts, and physical education and health have quickly diminished in public schools (Walker, 2014). For most, it would be hard to argue that one could reach their full potential or have a satisfying and productive life without an understanding of civic life and responsibility, geography, the sciences, the arts, and physical and mental health. Schlechty stated in 1990 that "the present school structure grew out of a set of assumptions about the purpose of schooling that is inconsistent with emerging social and economic realities" (p. xviii). In the 19 years since he made that argument, schools have only become more

grounded in those assumptions and the "emerging social and economic realities" have stopped being emerging and now just are.a push to a more standards-based education stemmed from NCLB (2002) and became only more intense during the move to the Common Core (2010). Zhao (2018) claimed that when the focus is on the Common Core, other subjects like the arts, civics, and health and activities that might promote students' long-term growth are sidelined; side effects might include student creativity, curiosity, and confidence. Robinson (2010) put the cost of this mentality best when he stated, "If you run an education system based on standardization and conformity that suppresses individuality, imagination, and creativity, don't be surprised if that's what it does" (p. xxii). Furthermore, courses that do value imagination and creativity, like music, are only given credence when somebody argues for their worth in relationship to how they might impact scores on the core subjects. Measuring everything based on the impact it might have on reading and math scores on the standardized tests is exactly the effect standardization and a focus on CCR has had on education (Walker, 2014). Real reform, something that actually aligns the purpose of education with the practice of education, will forever be trapped in the same system Dewey called to reform in 1938 until teachers are no longer held accountable to testing that truly only values the 3 Rs.

The literature reviewed above was the foundation on which this school was built; it was the foundation for planning process and what we needed to help convince larger school district to believe in us. I spent years studying the research on motivation theory, social and emotional learning, and agency and executive functioning to design the school. And while the physical space inside the school was the manifestation of

that learning, this dissertation was the first opportunity to articulate into words what motivated this process. As I moved from being a reader about education reform to a reformer myself, I decided I would make the leap and try what the research suggested so the school and what I explored in the vignettes would be the application of that learning.

In regard to EF and agency, we planned a school where the student was responsible for his or her behavior and where the teacher facilitated his or her understanding of choices instead of making all of the choices for him/her. For our educational model, we planned to help students develop agency and EF through growth plans set up by the students based on goals they had for themselves in relationship to the standards; they would direct their own learning. Students would also have agency over the physical space and would be able to help move and adapt the space to meet their learning needs. Motivation was targeted through facilitating challenging work and projects guided by the students as they worked toward developing as a learner and targeting the five types of engagement.

For social and emotional well-being, we had small class sizes where students at all levels stayed with the same teacher every day. This allowed our collaborators to better know and meet students' emotional needs. Additionally, we used a morning meeting model to check-in daily, used guided meditation to learn physiological responses to stress and anxiety, and did a daily check-out to see where students' emotional needs were daily. We also provided students at all levels with two unstructured recesses daily and other breaks as needed along with lots of opportunities for socialization. Students also got a 30-minute lunch as opposed to the 20-minute

lunch other schools in our district provided. Our kindergarten and first-second grade band also engaged in more play-based learning and a large amount of time for socialization each day.

While these ideas were in-line with the research, in public school they became a gamble. Student growth on test scores would be fairly predictable and incremental if you administered a particular type of instruction. For educators, predictability was safe because school funding and accreditation were based on these scores. An adequate body of research showed many of things we were trying were effective for student learning but it was rare that any particular school attempted to implement all of them from the very beginning. I hypothesized that our greatest challenge this year would be to stick to our mission and avoid the pull to do what was safe. While there were schools who looked similar to ours, most were private schools that were not held to the same academic standards since they were beholden to parents and not state or local school districts.

Many of the following vignettes focused on the dissonance created as we tried to embrace the research and leave behind the tradition in fairly uncharted waters.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze my own experience of working with others to start a school grounded in research about learning and the purpose of education juxtaposed with the context of education described in Chapter I. My desire was to determine in what ways I was able to personally grow as an educator and face the constant cognitive dissonance I faced as a product of the system. Additionally, I wanted to critically evaluate the pressure reformers faced in a time of high standards and high accountability.

Chapter III explains why autoethnography was the best method for this level of critical analysis, the theoretical framework for this type of research, and the data collection procedures I used and will continue to use to accurately and critically analyze the experience within the social context as I experienced it. The intention of the analysis was to seek answers to the following research questions:

Q1   What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

Q2   In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

Q3   What can I learn from confronting the dilemmas that exist from my own historical experiences in education?

Description of Setting

This study took place in a small Innovation Status school in a city in Northern Colorado. Innovation Status is a designation bestowed by the Colorado Department of Education to public schools, within a school district, that are a part of the school district, but Innovation Schools may have waivers like a charter. Charters are not beholden to the school district for curriculum, instruction, hiring, and school-based assessments; however, charters have their own school board. Our school operates similarly; whereas, our school leadership team is the decision-making body on curriculum, instruction, hiring, and school-based assessment, yet we share the same school board as the local district. Additionally, we are overseen by the district superintendent and the district leadership council.

The Innovation School has 125 students who come from 25 different local schools or from homeschooled environments. Our school is made of 54% Free and Reduced Lunch, with 52% of students who are Latinx or African-American and 49% of students who are white/Caucasian. There 10% of students who are on and Individualized Education Plan, and 6% of students who have a 504 Plan. Only 5% of students are English Language Learners.

Learning at The Innovation School takes place in twelve-week learning loops. A learning loop is a theme-based loop where students move through the following phases: inform, inspire, ignite, and innovate. During this process, students learn about the theme, are immersed in a teacher-led project, then begin to propose their own ideas for research. During the Innovate phase, they put their research into action by creating a project that will be on display at museum night, the name for our public showcase where parents,

family members, and the outside community visit the school to see the projects the students have been creating.

Students are in bands, rather than classes, and these bands have color names instead of grade-levels. These bands are comprised of 13-18 students who are within three grade-levels of each other with the largest span being four years in age. The collaborators assign the bands based on the student needs and which collaborator and peer group would be the best to meet those needs. The needs identified are often more social-emotional in nature and not academic, although academic needs are taken into consideration as well. Project-based learning is personalized to meet students at their level, but the varied levels allow students to learn from a variety of peers. There are no teachers at The Innovation School; however, there are collaborators. Because labels matter, the idea is that the collaborator is there to guide the student in their learning, but the collaborator does not hold all of the knowledge.

The school has open spaces, and only the kindergarteners' room has a door on it. The building was once a car dealership, so the space on the southside of the building is an old showroom, complete with very shiny tile and large windows. This space houses students who would traditionally be first and second graders and is often referred to as "South Bay." In the center of the building there is a flexible learning space that we have named the "Artrium" because it has a skylight and houses most of the art supplies. Just north of that space is a warehouse looking space, complete with a large garage door, called the "Black-Forest." Our groups are all labeled with colors instead of grade levels, and the Black-Forest is the home for our Black and Forest-Green bands. These bands are comprised of our fifth and sixth graders and our seventh and eighth graders respectively.

West of the Black-Forest is the Cherry-Lime band. Cherry-Lime is made up of our Red and Lime-Green bands, which is our third through fifth graders. This is also the space for our lunchroom.

The school is made up of many flexible spaces and it is filled with many flexible people. For instance, in the Artrium is our front office, and in the front office is our office manager, health clerk, and woodshop teacher. This does not mean that three people share this space; instead, one person is responsible for all of these jobs. We do not have a principal; however, we have three lead collaborators who are in charge of all of the administrative responsibilities. I, for instance, am one of the lead collaborators, but I also have a full-time job at the local university. Most of my administrative responsibilities are limited to work I can do outside of the regular work day.

Positionality

I am an educator. I have taught middle through high school, I have been an instructional coach for teachers, and I am currently a college professor teaching in The School of Teacher Education at a midsized university in Colorado. In terms of this research, though, it is most important to note that I am one of three co-founders of the school that is the focus of this dissertation. I am also a doctoral student and much of the research that has led to the founding of the school, stemmed from the work in my doctoral program. It is admittedly hard for me to separate the years of work and passion that have gone into the creation of the school and the writing about the work. It is my hope that the passion comes through in such a way that the narrative is meaningful, and yet, that I have taken the appropriate safeguards to maintain objectivity.

To give some background on who I am and how I arrived at a point where I started a school, it is important to share my own background with education. While some of this background is in the "Prologue," my true experience started when I was a student in a traditional school setting. In that time, I was a good student academically, but I was not engaged in school. I also came from a family where education was not a priority, and, although my older brother went to community college for a year, there was nobody in my immediate family who had completed college. Statistics on me being successful in education were not in my favor.

However, in the 7th and 8th grade I had a teacher who made sure that school was an authentic experience, where students were able to engage in hands-on learning, and she inspired and celebrated curiosity. While this did not change my relationship with education as a whole, it gave me a glimpse of what school could look like, and it created an environment where I, a student with a significant number of absences, suddenly wanted to come to school. I did not know it at the time, and in fact, I did not know it until a decade later, but that middle school class inspired me to be a teacher, and as I learned about theories of motivation in my doctoral program, it suddenly made sense why I was so engaged. When I finally ended up pursuing education as a field of study and a future career in my early twenties, I pursued education with the goal of inspiring the uninspired, motivating the unmotivated, and challenging the unchallenged.

While I had lost my way within the system at several points along the way, it was my experience working in a charter school (where I learned about autonomy) and my experience as an instructional coach (where I learned about theory and application), that empowered me to seek out more education. I entered my doctoral program in 2013 with a

desire to start a school, and it is with my own experience as a student, educator, mentee, graduate student, and mother that allowed me to pursue this passion. These have shaped my personal beliefs about the topic of education as a whole and about the topic of education within The Innovation School.

I am passionate about this topic, that I hope is clear. Yet, I am also passionate about research as a means to inform, inspire, and change systems. Because of that, I have tried, to the best of my ability, to recall things accurately; to use my record keeping as a tool to remove bias; and to rely on my co-founders to check perceptions and recollections of moments. It is my hope that by taking these steps to provide an accurate narrative account of starting a school and year one, that I may inspire others to also make changes to the education system.

Institutional Review Board

Much like autobiography, autoethnography is a narrative study of self. Qualitative research expert, Carolyn Ellis, contends that IRB approval is not needed in autoethnography when the results are not generalizeable beyond the individual (Ellis, et al., 2011). In this autoethnographic research, the goal is to only study myself during the process of starting a singular school situated in the context of modern education.

Methodological Framework

Autoethnography is grounded in postmodern interpretivism and acknowledges that within the nature of interpretivism, all research and all knowledge have the potential and possibility of being subjective and can be interpreted (Creswell, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011). The ultimate goal of autoethnography grounded in postmodern interpretivism is "not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for

understanding of others (culture/society) through self" (Chang, 2016, p. 48); this link between the researcher and the culture in which they exist allows for both cultural analysis and personal reflection. As I mentioned in Chapter I, one goal of this process was to provide a narrative for other reformers to see an experience that might or might not be followed. Autoethnography matches that goal because "autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also, must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276). While the methodological framework was not as structured, this lack of structure allowed flexibility to meet the needs of the reader and researcher (Thomson, 2011).

Autoethnography is about the process and the product (Chang, 2016) as researchers write autoethnography to help both people on the inside and the outside understand the culture and the cultural experiences while producing an experience that is both aesthetic and descriptive (Ellis et al., 2011). This autoethnography attempted to provide both an aesthetic experience to help insiders and outsiders through both reflexive analysis and layered accounts. Reflexive accounts look back and analyze an experience that has already happened. Reflection started with the narrative of starting the school up until the doors opened with detailed analysis from this beginning (Ellis, 2004). Layered accounts was the research that occurred from when the students entered the building; analysis and experience occurred simultaneously and were explored through vignettes including interpretations of the voices of collaborators, students, and parents to chronicle the "emergent experience" (Ronai, 1992, p. 123).

Autoethnography often faces scrutiny in the scientific world of research. It is frequently seen as too artful, emotional, and not rigorous enough (Ellis, 2009). Additionally, autoethnography is seen as being biased and self-absorbed (Anderson, 2006; Gans, 1999). Ellis et al. (2011) argued that this unfairly pit art against science and was not focused on the goal of the research. Furthermore, they said the three most important questions autoethnographers sought to answer were "who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 284). One issue I always had with the field of educational psychology was it did not seem to speak to the field it was attempting to inform. Educators do not generally subscribe to research journals, but they do frequently read narratives of other educator's experiences (Osborne & Mollette, 2010). This method was chosen based on the ability to respond to the research questions and the intended audience was for this research--educators.

Data Sources

Keeping a data trail has never been my "thing." While I frequently told teacher candidates in the program that I coordinate to keep reflective journals of their teaching, I personally had never been great on following through on my own reflective journaling. Luckily, we began this process in a time when the cloud and collaborative documents were beginning to become a necessity and I was able to become organized in spite of myself.

Because of text messaging, Google Docs, Google Drive, email, and social media, I ended up with much more data than I would ever be able to process. While I read through all of the data, I limited the data I coded and used based on research on

qualitative data reduction. Namey, Guest, Thairu, and Johnson (2008) state that "Eliminating data not relevant to the analysis at hand—or extracting the data that are relevant—is usually the first, and arguably the simplest, form of data reduction" (pg. 140). While there were many meaningful emails and text messages that were sent, there were also five emails about the planters to be used in the front of the building, and fourteen text messages about what color scheme we were planning to wear to the ribbon cutting ceremony. While pieces of communication such as these tell a story of their own, they are not "relevant to the analysis at hand" (Namey et al., 2008, pg. 140). To determine what was relevant, I looked at the coded material, the categories, and research questions (LaFrance, 2016). My process for selecting vignettes followed a similar process. While I wrote many more vignettes than I ended up using (Appendix D), I ultimately used my research questions to determine what vignettes and themes were relevant to answering the research questions.

The co-founders of the school, Michael, Danica, and I opened a Google Doc at our very first meeting in December of 2014 to keep a constant line of dialogue. Now, because of the features in Google Docs, I was able to see every note we ever took from every meeting we ever had including every conversation we had while creating the document and every change we made throughout the entire process. We also had a separate Google Doc from when we became a part of the school district where we kept notes from all of those meetings as well. In addition, I have every email conversation ever written between the founders, the school district, prospective and current parents, and now the new collaborators. I still have every text message ever sent; with social media, I have every exchange with parents and every announcement we made along the

way. Finally, as a staff we used a shared Google Drive that allowed us to share what was important to us including work and ideas. Because of my new-found familiarity with Google Docs, I have become much better at recording my experiences and have begun to journal when events happen that I need to reflect on or analyze later. All of these materials left me with a data trail that provided ample data for the research ahead.

The data that I analyzed was vast (see Appendix B). I made one folder in each of my Google Drives. The first drive was called "D. Documents" and this was my personal drive; it contained all of the data I have collected via Google from the planning phases. This drive contained all drafts of our Innovation Plan, notes from our planning meetings, pictures and notes from community meetings, and work from the Charter School Grant. The second drive was the Google Drive connected to the school account. In this drive, I filed everything that might be relevant for the study from after the school opened. Between these two drives were 100 total documents with a total of 934 pages. For the study, I ended up using 23 of these documents for a total of 137 pages and one picture to capture a note written by a student.

I also made a separate folder in each of my email inboxes to save emails that might be relevant as well. The folder in my personal inbox is called "School emails" and it contains 404 email exchanges from before we opened the school starting on February 18th, 2015. In my school district email, I saved 434 emails in a folder called "Dissertation Emails." After reading through these emails, I ended up using content from 53 different emails or 21 different exchanges.

While I mentioned I had never been great at recording in a journal, I did carry a journal with me from time to time. This journal was a white leather-bound journal that

has "Google" imprinted on the front. In this journal, I recorded notes from our first meeting; I journaled about our trip to San Francisco; and I journaled about interactions between me and the other co-founders and interactions with parents. These journals made up 32 pages; however, I only used data from approximately 11 pages. I also recorded two events directly after the fact.

The co-founders and I have a text-strand I titled "The School of Innovation (TSOI) Leadership" and I have an additional text-strand with all of the collaborators. A total of 2,317 messages were sent between these two groups with over 1,500 just on the "TSOI Leadership" text strand. While I analyzed hundreds of these to determine which parts of the story to share, 63 specific messages with 18 total conversations were used to piece together the narrative.

Facebook was also beneficial as a way to record conversations, specifically conversations from parents. From these data, I analyzed 42 Facebook messages and selected four to share. I also received several messages on Facebook Messenger, analyzed four of these messages, and used one message as data for a vignette.

I used pseudonyms for each person; I used a bank of male and female names to identify names that were not closely related to the original name. Additionally, I changed the name of the school to "The Innovation School." This was because an Innovation School is a designation given to any school that receives Innovation status; in our district alone are five Innovation status schools.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I followed the five elements of the "data analysis spiral" (Creswell, 2012, p.183). The spiral itself did not follow steps but instead was recursive

and sometimes even simultaneous. The spiral was comprised of the following elements: organizing data; reading and memoing; describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes; interpreting the data, and representing the data. The first step in data analysis was organizing the data after collection. Most of the collected data were saved in the "cloud" and I began by accessing the data in a chronological sequence to aptly describe the steps in the process of starting the school.

As I organized and collected new data, I moved it into "initial categories" (Creswell, 2012, p. 184) I called "minor categories" (see Appendix B). I identified these minor categories by highlighting my notes (see Appendix C) based on the minor categories in which the data fit; when necessary, I added new minor categories. I then used coding to "aggregate the data …into small categories of information" (Creswell, 2012, p. 184). I did this by creating "major categories" that helped me narrow the categories. From the major categories, I established seven themes; however, I only used four of these themes in the dissertation: selling the idea, agency, incongruence, and roots. I chose these four questions because they best answered the research questions.

To analyze and interpret the data, I continuously made connections between the research questions, the literature review, and the data collected. This allowed me to narrow my vignettes into the most relevant ones that would allow me to "elicit emotional identification and understanding" (Denzin, 1989, p.124) for the reader by creating several narratives that could tell a unified story (Humphreys, 1999). The vignettes I wrote are an attempt to discover self and others through consistent and constant analysis of the data and discovery through the lens of the established themes, the research questions, and the literature (Ellis, et al., 2011). Some vignettes were not

selected and some stories were not written because they did not contribute to the unified whole or they did not contribute to further understanding of the research questions.

Reliability, Generalizability, and Validity

In the context of autoethnography, the terms *reliability*, *generalizability*, and *validity* are different than in most quantitative research (Ellis et al., 2011). For example, while reliability in quantitative research refers to the consistency and stability of an assessment tool (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011), reliability in autoethnography is about the credibility of the researcher (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Generalizability as a part of quantitative research is about how well the research can be applied from a sample population to the population at large but in autoethnography generalizability is about how well the writer took into account the needs of the reader and the ability of the researcher to inform or inspire the reader through the work. Validity looks at how well a test is able to measure what it is intended to measure (Gay et al., 2011) but in autoethnography, validity is about the authenticity of the research and whether or not it has faced critical appraisal (Ellis et al., 2011).

To meet these established needs, I used a variety of systems to ensure the research was taken seriously. First, to make certain I was seen as credible in my account, I used detailed notes captured from the process and coded them as reliably as I could. Additionally, the other co-founders helped perform external checks on coding as an to solidify that my notes and the themes that I identified could be confirmed as accurate (Creswell, 2012; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This was done by sharing my notes and themes with them through email throughout the process. We me

twice to discuss the notes and the themes that were derived from the notes. Additionally, I made changes on three occasions based on differences in recollections between me and the other two co-founders. Validity was assured by using only data created authentically. The data were critically appraised by verifying themes and checking derived themes with literature on the subject. For example, the theme "agency" was derived because of literature that existed on the theme of agency, and this literature was incorporated into my literature review. While the theme "incongruence" did not come from the literature on incongruence, but instead the disconnect between the literature on learning and motivation and what was observed in educational settings. Generalizability in this context came from researching and firmly understanding both the audience and the context in which the writing occurred. I used Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) criteria for reviewing monographs: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, and impact. By using these criteria as a standard for the quality of the writing and analysis, I determined the level of generalizability of the work.

Limitations

Limitations in autoethnography stem from issues surrounding the relationship between "the knower (i.e., the participant) and the would-be knower (i.e., the researcher)" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 5). In the case of autoethnography, these two are obviously the same. With self-report and self-knowledge being a factor in this type of study, I was limited in generalizability based on the fact I controlled the parts of the narrative I chose to share, creating a limitation when I did not self-disclose pertinent information (Méndez, 2013). For instance, since everyone at the school knew I was

writing this, I knew there was the potential for them to read it as well. Because of that, I likely limited what I would share for fear I might write something that would negatively impact someone I cared about.

Another issue with generalizability was everything represented here was contextually bound by the people who worked at the school, the school district and board with which we worked, the students we attracted, and, of course, the school founders.

Another group of school leaders could attempt to follow precisely everything we did and have a completely different result. While I recognized this limitation from the beginning, I was not attempting to write research that was wholly generalizable; instead, I wanted to share the narrative of our experience because I had been inspired to action through the narratives of others.

This autoethnography was comprised of both reflection and layered accounts; within both, I found my ability to control the narrative limited the narrative. While I used my notes and tried to accurately recall information as best as I could, the stories were frequently clouded by multiple factors such as my mood, what was happening in education at the time, and who I thought might read the dissertation. For instance, half of my writing took place after we received our turnaround status designation. This became central to so much of my experience and while this did not hinder an accurate recall of the experience, it likely narrowed the lens through which I viewed everything. Notes I recorded prior to our experience with testing were potentially viewed through the lens of testing when I reflected on the experience.

Additionally, a limitation for this type of research stemmed from the field in which I was trying to create it. While educational leadership, sociology, anthropology, and English all embrace autoethnography as a valid form of research in the field, educational psychology has been much more likely to embrace positivism and post positivism as paradigms but much less likely to embrace methods using interpretivism. Despite this, I learned the method of research should stem from the goal of the research. All of my experience has occurred in the field of education and while empirical data are incredibly useful, I found most educators turned to narratives to inform their decision making. Autoethnography allowed me to provide the research base in the literature review while sharing the narrative in the data analysis that might be inspirational to other educators wanting to reform the system but not knowing where to start.

Finally, there is always a risk of bias in this type of research. Because the data I collected were often written by myself or one of the other co-founders, it was difficult to get an accurate member check since we all had a similar memory and record of the events. I attempted to eliminate bias by recording data as accurately as possible, using quotes when available, and relying on the other members in the experience to identify issues with recall. It was difficult to eliminate bias entirely with my own singular perspective; however, autoethnography is about the autoethnographer recalling as accurately as possible what has happened (Bochner & Ellis, 2002) and I have done that. Despite the limitations related to reliability, validity, and generalizability, and bias, Ellis (2004) argued that there is an agreed upon understanding between the reader and researcher that autoethnography is subjective. She argued that this agreement

actually solidifies the honesty in autoethnography because the admission of

subjectivity is better than the illusion of objectivity.

CHAPTER IV

VIGNETTES

The vignettes in this chapter are more than stories; they are evidence of the larger questions with which I wrestled in trying to reform a small slice of education. In these narratives, I share my journey as I learned or explore the following question: How do I build an alternative school culture? This question was explored through three different lenses:

Q1   What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

Q2   In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

Q3   What can I learn from confronting the dilemmas that exist from my own historical experiences in education?

There are long days, late nights, tears, celebrations, moments of joy, and moments of utter sorrow and loss in a creation. Starting the school was no different and I can definitively state that I experienced the full spectrum of emotions frequently. There were days when I walked through the school and my eyes filled with tears watching our dream brought to life in our students and there have been meetings I have attended where my eyes filled with tears as someone explained that what we were doing was not real learning. During this journey, Danica, Michael, and I became close in a way that only people who have been together through these emotions can become. In

this closeness, we spent a lot of time together working, celebrating, and commiserating. Many of these meetings involved a toast of some type--either to what would be or a toast in mourning of some type of experience. Here are a few toasts we shared in the past four years.

Toast 1: To Starting a School

After our first few months of working together, we finalized our letter of intent to submit to the school district. This letter was our formal announcement that we were officially planning to start a school. On March 18, 2015 we had enough of our instructional model drafted, had a complete mission statement, and a plan for enrollment to have a completed letter for submission. We sent our letter off to the interim district superintendent and all of the school board members and then we went out to celebrate.

Despite the fact that we had spent the previous months working on the Charter Schools Planning documents and we had completed many items on our own personal to- do lists, this moment of sending off the letter was the first moment it all seemed real to me. We had invited other people to our meetings and into our circle but now we were expanding outward. We were sharing with people who might not actually be excited about what we were doing and it was simultaneously exciting and terrifying.

We met at a local tap house to finish up the document and pushed send. I was truly giddy with the accountability that was going to come from being public to the school district. We ordered our beers and raised our glasses and Danica said, for the first time, a phrase that marked many moments of celebration throughout the process, "Guys, we're going to start a school!" We tapped our glasses together and daydreamed about

what we thought might happen next. We assumed there might be push back from some members of the board, that the interim superintendent might not take us seriously, or that he would but would immediately try to railroad us. I knew him from my days of working with a charter school and my experience with him was he was not very charter school friendly. I braced a bit for the blowback but it never came. Ultimately, there was only one response and it came from the school board president who said he looked forward to hearing more about our plan.

A few months later, I received a phone call from a school board member I worked with at the university. He invited me out for coffee and asked something that would ultimately become pivotal to our process. There was now a new superintendent in the school district and he asked if we might become a part of the school district. Truthfully, I had desired that from the beginning but did not see how it was possible with the old superintendent; however, now it was completely possible. I just was not sure if we were ready for that type of partnership. I planned to make contact with the new superintendent soon.

Toast 2: To San Francisco

Danica, Michael, and I had been stalking a school on the internet for some time. Brightworks Academy was a private school housed in an old mayonnaise factory in downtown San Francisco; online, it looked exactly like what we were trying to do. It had been started by Gever Tulley (2008), the author of *50 Dangerous Things to Do with Your Child*. We had read his book, watched his TED Talk, and followed the school's blog.

Because of our interest in his work, we wrote in our initial start-up grant that we needed travel funds to go to see this school and in January of 2016m we hopped on a

flight and headed to San Francisco together. So many things about the trip were nerve-wracking. First, Michael and I were both terrible fliers. We had both traveled quite a bit but neither of us had ever really become comfortable with air travel. Second, we had been to several schools that looked amazing on the internet; however, in reality, they were just schools with a few bells and whistles but nothing completely different than what was traditional. Now we were traveling 1,000 miles hoping to see something different.

We got to San Francisco and settled into our hotel, found a little restaurant in the Cow Hollow neighborhood, and sat down to plan our route for the next couple days. Our original list had three schools on it: Brightworks Academy, the Khan Lab School, and the AltSchool. We had also added the Exploratorium to our list to see what innovation in a hands-on museum looked like and we all wanted to see the campus at Google. It was going to be a packed two days. Since the Exploratorium was in downtown San Francisco, we planned to go there right after Brightworks. Google and the Khan Lab School were both in Mountain View so we decided to see those on day two. If we had time, we planned to fit in the AltSchool but it was the one school where we had no tour scheduled.

We woke up early Monday morning and headed for our scheduled visit at Brightworks. There was plenty of time to think and talk in the car in the San Francisco rush hour traffic. All of us spoke about being nervous that we had traveled all of this way just to find out Brightworks was just another place that looked great on the Internet. To me, it felt like there was a lot riding on this. If we could not find any examples of what we were planning to do, was it possible the examples did not exist? And if they did not exist, was it because this just was not a form of education that worked?

From the outside, it looked like an old mayonnaise factory but this old mayonnaise factory was right across the street from *MindShift*, one of my favorite publications of more progressive forms of education reform. It was a great sign. I held my breath as we walked in the front door to find a very unusual entrance to a school.

There was a booth, like you might find at concert hall and a woman in her early 20s greeted us. Our tour involved two other schools and we were soon greeted by Gever Tulley (2008) hereinafter called Gever. The energy upon first walking in was incredible. Student projects were everywhere and the students buzzed around the space completely uninterested in us. I looked at Michael and Danica and said, "I feel like I just showed up for a blind date and the guy was even hotter than his profile picture!"

Our tour started in the woodshop and I was so amazed to hear about how even the youngest kids had access to the tools with adult support. The woodshop and tools were right up front, not in some hidden room down the farthest hallway, as I had noticed was the norm in most high schools. I had never been in an elementary school with a woodshop. I wanted this kind of access for my own children because I knew that much of what I truly understood about math, geometry, and physics came from working with real tools and building. The fact that using the woodshop was part of daily life at Brightworks was inspiring and reassuring for what we had imagined; our mission statement had already been written and "connecting students with real tools" was a key piece of our mission. To see they were doing it and had been around for over a decade without anyone getting hurt was reassuring.

After the short tour of the space, Gever gave us a brief overview of the instructional model and where students were in their learning progression at this point in

time. During this talk, we noticed students darting back and forth, often unaccompanied by a teacher. When we asked him what they were doing, he would pull the student over and have him or her explain for him/herself. For instance, on one such occasion, the student came over and Gever said "Can you tell these people why you are hiding under the table with the black blanket on it?" The student, who looked to be about eight or nine, said "Sure. I am collecting data" and he showed us his notebook. "What are you collecting data on?" Gever asked. "I am measuring some sprouts we have under there," he said pointing to the blanket-covered table. "We are trying to see if plants can grow without natural light!" he said excitedly.

I should not have been blown away that second or third grade kids were "collecting data." This seemed like a natural experiment for kids to be conducting but the nature of it all felt so different. There was no teacher direction here; the students were collecting their own data on an experiment they designed, based on a question they had, with variables they created. I remembered my own schooling filled with worksheets, some on photosynthesis. I was fairly certain I grew a seed in a bag or a Dixie cup at some point but I never had this much autonomy on experiment design even in high school. I thought of my own children, backpacks filled with worksheets, not conducting their own experiments either, their own questions being pushed to the wayside so someone else could tell them what to learn. My eyes filled with tears that this type of learning was not just a possibility--it was happening.

Gever told us to tour the space. We had free reign to walk around, take pictures, and ask students questions. I popped into a small room that was situated under a loft space. Here I sat with a group of fourth and fifth graders who were helping another

student with feedback on her project design; again, there was no teacher present. The student was doing a proposal for a project that looked at making soap out of plants found in the local park. She had done research and found that early natives in the area made soap from the plants in the park. Because the park had a large population of people who were experiencing homelessness, she had hoped to provide a sustainable and locally sourced product that could help this population. In her feedback group, she was looking at her budget for product production, the needs of the community, and the feasibility of making enough soap to meet the group's needs. I was blown away by what I was seeing. A group of 9- and 10-year-olds was giving another student meaningful feedback to develop a product for a project that could make a real impact in her community.

When Danica, Michael, and I met up, we all had similar stories. Each one of us was incredibly impressed by what the students were doing and capable of doing. Gever brought us all back together in the central art space and began to share with us his own stories of start-up and the obstacles and trials he had been through over the past decade. The tour was over but he spent a little extra time with us since we were the only ones trying to start a school. Some of the important things he reminded us of were parents were used to seeing evidence that their students were learning by having spelling tests and worksheets to hang on the refrigerator. He assured us that parents would be supportive but that they would also push back when they did not have these traditional markers of school work. After our first year, I can confirm this was definitely true but it happened less than I assumed.

We left Brightworks ready to take on the world. Our next stop was the museum where we spent the afternoon watching how children interacted with the exhibits at the

Exploratorium. We took notes on how the written descriptions were often ignored by children but read by parents. I made observations about how some kids seemed to thrive with all of the sensory input and some shut down. The exhibits were also interactive and instructional; it was from this experience that we came up with the idea for museum night. I struggled to even process the amount of new learning I had experienced in a day.

The next day, our experience was not nearly as impactful, perhaps because we had so much to process from our first day. We could not stop talking about Brightworks and the museum so we struggled to even be present at Khan Lab School or Google. We spoke rapidly and jotted notes and ideas as fast as they came to us. We headed over to the Google campus and wandered around daydreaming and discussing, but hardly taking in anything. We left Google with stars in our eyes and headed to the airport in Oakland. We found a small restaurant and sat down to get some dinner. It was just a few days after my birthday so each of us ordered a beer to celebrate. We were beaming from our trip and even got a nice surprise as the server sang a birthday rap to me. I really enjoyed this moment but also could not wait to get back home and back to work on our design. Prior to this trip we had stalled a bit in our progress but after being in San Francisco, I knew in my heart we were actually going to make this happen. We raised our glasses and said our toast, "To starting a school!" We clinked our glasses together and headed home with full notebooks, full brains, and full hearts.

Toast 3: To an Innovation School

I tend to get really focused on a task and then I cannot seem to walk away from it, even when I am not meeting basic human needs. I may forego food, sleep, human interaction, or changing out of my pajamas to finish a really great puzzle. Sometimes

hyper-focus is my curse and sometimes it is my superpower. When it came to completing our school's website, it was my superpower. I had paid a web developer a decent sum of money out of my own pocket to create a website for us but she never came through. By the time we were going public in the community and with the school district, we had a simple shell of a website that was only good enough to send an email.

Other than one time in my undergraduate degree, I had never built a website myself. It was not a skill I necessarily desired but the night before my meeting with the superintendent, I acquired this skill. It was one of the many random skills I had to pick up along the way. I wanted to be taken seriously and I felt that for some reason a website would give us the credibility we needed. I started at four o'clock in the afternoon putting together a website and by three in the morning, I had something I believed was worthy. I took pieces from our charter draft, made up ideas on the fly, purchased stock photography, and built a website I thought communicated who we were and what we wanted to do.

I walked into the superintendent's office and it dawned on me that I had been in education for nearly a decade at this point and had never spoken to a superintendent, even as an instructional coach for the local school district where I spent one day a week working in the school district's office. I had been incredibly nervous but was quickly put at ease by her very friendly demeanor. First, I shared with her my story about why I had removed my own children from the school district. I talked about the experience of a teacher asking me if I had considered homeschooling my child, of the threats of my child being retained for slow reading rates and an attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder diagnosis. I shared how I had sent my child to an arts magnet for more arts but her

experience was limited to the same amount of arts the other schools received and long literacy blocks with only 15 minutes of recess. She was receptive to my concerns and listened with empathy; she assured me things were changing and asked how to get my kids back to the school district. I told her I was planning to start a school and when I did, they would be back at school in our community but it would likely be a charter school.

She had not heard anything about it; my belief that we were not being taken seriously was true. I began to tell her about our model and how we had already partnered with the Colorado League of Charter Schools (2019) and had received a grant. I also told her how we had traveled in and out of state to look at other school models. She began to give statistics about the number of students in charters in our city, told me she believed we might be saturated, and it did not seem like our district might need or be able to support another charter.

Then, I showed her the website. It worked--all of those hours of work the night before had made a difference. She was immediately drawn in to what looked like a different model of education. Her message went from doubt about how the district could not handle another charter to why we should become a district school. I kept my best poker face, not sharing that this was my own desire as well, and told her we would consider it. We set up a date in the near future to sit down as a team to talk about what this partnership might look like.

I met with Danica and Michael later that evening at the tap house; we created a list of pros and cons for partnering with the district and "must haves." Some of our pros were "access to real estate and legal team," "advertising," and "bigger team can move quicker" while our cons were "don't get to solely pick team," "putting trust in others,"

and "potential loss of autonomy." After looking over our list, we noted that one of the big "pros" was this would "allow for our sole focus to be on curriculum and instruction."

This was huge and enough of a pro that we were willing to take the risk to at least try. If this partnership could work, there would no longer be overnights of putting together websites and we would no longer be fumbling every time someone said, "Cool! But how will you get a building?" We raised our glasses and with caution we said, "To the next step."

Toast 4: To 183

Once we decided to explore our partnership with the school district, they became the most hung up on whether or not we would be able to attract families to our school. The title of this autoethnography came from this hang up. Frequently, the superintendent would remark, "Well this sounds great, but really, I am just not sure our town is ready for something like this." We had nothing to reassure her with but faith. I had talked to so many parents whose children were surviving but not thriving in school--many whose children were not doing either. We had already held two community events and had moderate interest but I could not point her to any particular measures that showed we could fill a school. We did pay a researcher from the local university to send out a survey to gather interest and showed that 95 out of 100 parents surveyed were interested in a different model of education but even that sample was limited to a very specific demographic who were not as likely to attend a school in our downtown neighborhood.

I became pretty active on social media and began sending out articles about different kinds of schools to try to gather a following. We created a few different mini-camps to start to meet families and share our model with the public and we started to

attend community events in shirts with fancy district-made fliers to share with the public what our school would be about. Many people were interested but also skeptical. While I always valued questions, I started to wonder too if our community would be ready for this model when people asked things like, "Well how are you going to teach things like he alphabet; you know, how are they going to learn that this (finger spells in the air) is a letter 'A'?"

Over time, though, we started to get a bit of a following; I realized we did not need everyone to want to come to our school--just the people who truly believed in what we were doing. People were posting about us on Facebook and sharing our message. We were one year away from opening, we had 300+ followers on Facebook, and we had put many hours into advertising. We had no building yet and still had few prospects but we decided it was time to open our "intent to enroll" to show the district there would be interest.

I was incredibly nervous launching this form. There was no level of commitment with it and up to this point, I was still basing our enrollment projections on "a gut feeling." In fact, I even quoted *Field of Dreams* (Costner et al., 1989) to the superintendent. When she asked where I thought we would be with enrollment, I said "If you build it, they will come." She laughed and said, "I need something more than that to prove to the board that this will attract families." I posted the open enrollment form to our social media, put a link on our website, and placed Facebook ads to advertise. We needed at least 75 students to open the school and we had just three months to get those numbers with no posted curriculum, no board approval, and no building. I said a quick prayer, "please let this work!", and then vowed to ignore the enrollment numbers for the next

week. I made it one day. I held my breath, logged in to my Google Forms, and squealed when I saw 29 names the very first day. Within two months, we had 85 students. I made a final push by reaching out to families ahead of the January 30th meeting with the board by creating advertisements on social media. We also hung fliers at local libraries and coffee shops and spoke to families at the refugee center and citizenship classes.

We held our first community meeting January 22nd, one week before the board meeting, with two more scheduled to follow in February. We rented a room in the library that would hold 50 and set up seats around the room for about that number. By then, it was 3:00 pm and we were ready to start--it was standing room only. I had never actually done anything like this before so I was really just hoping these speaking engagements would spark enough interest for the board to believe this model was a need in our community. I was floored by the turnout. Parents, even in our community, were looking for something else in education. In this setting, instead of being asked about teaching the letter "A," we were asked "how many tests will my kids have to take each month?" It was clear why parents were looking at our school.

After the meeting, we walked over to our familiar tap house to reflect and plan our next steps and I opened the "Intent to Enroll" spreadsheet. I had not checked the spreadsheet since winter break and the last I saw, we were at about 115 names. This was a solid number and possibly enough to convince the school board we had enough interest but I felt like we needed to be closer to 200 for them to truly get behind us. I clicked the link and began to scroll. I smiled as I moved past 100 to 115 to 120 and on up to 183 students. This was a good number; 183 students were a number to be taken seriously. We each picked up our glass and I said, "To 183!"

Toast 5: To the Long Haul

By our January 30th board meeting, we were all exhausted. Michael was dealing with some health issues likely related to stress and Danica was on the tail end of her second case of influenza in one year. Working full-time jobs while starting the school had taken its toll on all of us as we had all been burning the candle at all ends for quite some time. For instance, the week leading up to the January 30th presentation, we had had a 6:00 am meeting with our assistant superintendent, a two-hour community meeting, a TSOI leadership team planning session, and a parent presentation at the adult language learning center. This was in addition to the fact that we all taught throughout the week, Michael and I were both in graduate school, and we were trying to plan our curriculum and instructional model. I had also been putting the final touches on the Innovation Plan to prepare for our final board meeting in February and had to spend a significant amount of time familiarizing myself with school law and board policies to determine what we would waive in our Innovation Plan. It was all pretty overwhelming and with five months still left at this pace, I was not sure if I had the stamina to do it all.

With the February presentation on the radar, we all dug in deep. This was the last of our seven presentations to the school board. The superintendent believed it would be best for us if we took things slow with the board and presented one part of our model at a time. We were finally toward the end and were hoping this strategy worked. It had been a little over two years since we had begun and a little over a year since partnering with the school district; everything was about to come down to the February 13th board meeting. If we did not receive approval here, we would not be opening in 2017.

Ahead of the board meeting we were getting tons of updates about who might have questions and what questions they might have. We already knew who on the board was the most resistant and we also believed we had enough supporters for the vote to pass. My own personal goal, though, was to have a 7-0 vote. I did not want to leave the board meeting knowing anyone doubted our plan.

The night of the board meeting was tense. Michael, Danica, and I had worked ourselves into a bit of frenzy. This was it. Two whole years of work came down to this 15-minute presentation and even though we felt pretty confident that we had the votes, nothing was certain. I had been reading the book *To Sell is Human* (Pink, 2013) and learned that people buy into people, not statistics. I felt pretty confident we were all likeable and presented ourselves as competent but any "no" votes at the board meeting would be because someone did not believe in us. I knew our tactic was not to come off as well-educated and pedantic but we needed to let down our guard and be our comfortable and passionate selves.

We each had a piece of the presentation to share and mine was the mission but I did not read them the mission; they had already read it several times before at previous meetings. I used the time to present us. I took a deep breath and smiled and tried to harness the genuine elation I felt to be there in this moment. I paused for a long second and then said, nearly in tears, "I just want to take in this moment," took another long pause, and said, "We are finally standing here now presenting this finished plan to you, and I am just so amazed that this is actually happening." I could feel a connection with my audience and when I looked up, they were all smiling too. Then I read my speech:

First off, thank you to the District 6 Board and to the District 6 leadership team. We have appreciated this opportunity to partner with all of you over this past year and are sincerely grateful to be presenting our official plan in front of you tonight.

Introductions: DON'T FORGET

As a team we have spent the past two years collectively studying and researching how students learn, grow, and become motivated. What we have been in search of is an answer to the question "how do we prepare students for an ever-accelerating world while also meeting high levels of rigorous educational demands?" Our Innovation plan before you today are an answer to that question.

Today, we will explain how we have designed this innovative curriculum in order to teach our students to become problem-solvers and problem-finders. Modern society needs its students of the future to be able to develop the answers to the very hard questions this next generation will face.

We will show how our agile model will meet the needs of individual and diverse students so they may reach their unique full potential, not just the potential bound by grade levels, standards, and societal or cultural expectations.

We will identify how people are currently seeking out a new model. How parents are recognizing that the model that served them well may not best serve their own children in this rapidly changing world.

We are proposing a rigorous and innovative education design that asks students to take ownership of their own learning; that pushes boundaries in what we think students can do; that values flexibility as a way to adapt to our very rapidly changing world while meeting students' individual educational goals.

By opening as a new school, with a staff who desires to work in this unique structure, by training that staff and giving them ownership and autonomy within the model, and by allowing for flexibility to encourage growth, we know we will combat the obstacles that often get in the way of real educational change.

Albert Einstein said, "A ship is always safe at the shore--but that is NOT what it is built for." We come to you today, asking that you allow us to take this ship out to sea. We know it is ready.

My speech ended and we moved into the rest of our presentation, delivering

mostly nuts and bolts information. It went to a vote and I held my breath as it got to

each board member. One by one they shared why they felt this was good for our

community, why they supported us and our mission and vision, and one mentioned that our innovation plan was the most comprehensive plan they had ever read; it was mostly positive. Even the board member we worried about shared her concerns but voted yes. It was done. We had a 7-0 vote of support. My eyes welled up with tears as the families who supported us and our own families stood and clapped; the board members joined in, each one standing and clapping. The superintendent hugged us all and said, "We did it!"

We left that night and all of the hard work before seemed to have disappeared from my memory and all of what we had left to do suddenly felt energizing, not daunting. With our spouses, we went to get dinner. Once we had drinks in hand, we lifted our glasses and toasted to each other and the long haul we had taken to get here. We toasted to what was to come and the adventure that was about to begin. And we toasted to our spouses, the ones who supported us through hectic schedules, long phone calls on family vacations, and many late nights of not being home.

Toast 6: To Finding a Building

One element of partnering with the district that was a huge relief was having people to work on the real estate pieces for us. As much as we knew what we wanted, we had limited contacts in our community and limited time to build those relationships. Before the partnership, we had reached out to a few people and we had visited a few sites but figuring out how we would pay for these places or how to negotiate a contract was not a skill set any of us had. However, once we were approved by the school board, we had permission to secure a location and had a team of people to help us do it.

June was one of the finance officers at the school district and quickly became one of our major point people when she was appointed as our project manager. Her dedication to our project and to us was incredible and when we needed help with anything, even if that help was emotional about the process, she was there. When it came to finding a building, she quickly contacted everyone she knew in our downtown community. It was incredible to suddenly have that connection to major real estate owners and within a week, we were looking at several buildings.

Right away, two buildings caught our attention as being possible spaces. One was a second-floor space that had previously been run by the community college. A few issues with the space was it was set up with traditional classrooms, it did not have a feasible space for our woodshop, and it would have been difficult for pickup and drop off since it did not have a parking lot nearby and was on a major street. The benefits were a beautiful downtown space with high ceilings and tons of windows and looked like what I imagined about starting a school in somewhat of an urban setting.

The second building was a basement space. It was on the bottom floor of a building that was being renovated to accommodate more offices, restaurants, and a coffee shop. This space was wide open with tons of room to grow. We easily had several breakout rooms and a large shared learning space. It also had high ceilings and a decent sized kitchen that could be converted into a commercial kitchen fairly easily. But this space was also in a basement with little natural light. Additionally, a wood shop would not be easy to install here either because of the ventilation in a basement.

Ultimately, we decided we would be able to make either work but we were quite happy when June began the process of securing the basement space. We liked the

idea of a wide-open, large space, and we felt like having the offices in the same building might give us access to experts in the community. With contracts underway, I started to imagine our life in that space. Where might the individual bands go? How would we use the shared spaces and how would we use the breakout rooms? Would we have to renovate the kitchen entirely and would there need to be a separate dining space? However, while I was deep in the throes of daydreaming, things fell apart and June had decided this would not be our space. The owner of the building kept changing the terms of our contract and she was no longer comfortable with signing any sort of binding contract.

In the middle of this, we were starting to plan for hiring. With spring coming up, we knew it would be prime time to get the best candidates and we needed to officially nail down an interview process. We met one night at a little bar in the basement of the building that housed the former community college. Our conversation was mostly about hiring but it was also about bonding. All of us had taken turns during the winter fighting nasty illnesses and being on medication. This was the first time in a few months that we had all been healthy enough to be out together to share a meal and a drink. After a few hours of writing our interview questions for submission to the school district and a few drinks, we took the elevator upstairs to the second-floor space.

It was locked for the evening since none of the businesses located in it were open at night. That did not stop us from taking a picture of the floor plan, sitting outside of the space, and daydreaming. For over an hour, the three of us sat there on the floor just outside the door, planning what the next year might look like in this building. By the end of the night, I was certain this was going to be our space and we were going

to make it work. But it did not ever need to work. The second-floor space was owned by a real estate developer in our downtown area who also happened to be a large contributor to education. He also happened to own another space in the downtown area he believed might be a better home for the school.

When we went to tour the space, the first thing we noticed was the beautiful mural painted on the west side of the building. The entire wall was covered in bright colors with the face of a Muslim woman on the wall and the quote, "The Beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you." It had previously been an adult school for refugees and immigrants to learn to read. We walked in and nothing about it was exciting. In the main space, where the reading center was housed, there was shiny and outdated tile. very old carpet, and the walls were dingy and stained.

My daughter was home from school the day we toured the space and walked through the building with all of us. It was drafty, old, and a bit dilapidated; the garage spaces were completely packed with things ranging from junk to really valuable antiques. In one garage, my daughter pointed out a very large and squished dead rat. Chunks of concrete were coming up from some of the floors, there were holes in some of the walls, and there were broken windows everywhere. And yet, somehow, it was perfect. Well, maybe not perfect, but it was the first space where we did not feel limited by other tenants. We saw a possibility to use the space in really creative ways and it was within our budget.

Because of our deadlines, we needed to move quickly. June had an architect in the building a week later to walk through with us. While I really liked June immediately, an incident that occurred with the architect solidified that feeling. The

first architect was a woman from Denver who definitely did not get our vision. She could not fathom how this space with chipped concrete and a dead rat still on the floor could ever become a school and she made that very clear. She laughed at our budget and begrudgingly offered to draw up plans. Danica, Michael, and I were less than happy sharing our vision with this person who seemed so intent on criticizing what we wanted and mocking the space we needed to transform. That evening, I called June, I said we were not happy with the choice of the architect, and we would feel better if we could work with someone else. We did not have a lot of choices in architects since June was the project manager and we did not have a lot of time to be shopping around. Finding someone new meant adding at least another week to our timeline and weeks were moving by incredibly quickly. However, June was empathetic to our concern and told me if we did not like the architect, then she would not hire her for the job. There had been several times where June had our best interest in mind but this time, she put our best interest even before her own. We knew for sure she was an ally.

Ultimately, June worked incredibly hard to find an architect and contracting team to meet all of our demands a little ahead of schedule and just a little over budget. The project was completed in under six months and we got to have a ton of say in what the building would look like. I had been invited to every meeting with the contractors and we made every choice from the color of the walls to the color of the stalls.

While there were a few small hiccups, most things went smoothly and we obtained our certificate of occupancy on July 21st. All of our furniture and supplies had already been delivered and now we had the weekend to get them moved and built to get ready for our staff starting. It was all hands-on-deck for the weekend. We learned right

away how helpful our parents and families were going to be. I posted on our family Facebook page that we were going to need help assembling furniture, unpacking supplies, and building and moving everything to the right place. Several families showed up ready to help and after five hours, we had everything moved from the center of the garage space and a lot of the furniture built. We had done so much up to this point that required brain power that it was nice to focus on something physical for once. I enjoyed the time with Danica and Michael but also enjoyed starting to build a relationship with our new families. My own family even got to join in and it was nice having them as a part of the process.

It had been a long hard day in a building without air conditioning and at the end of it all, we were ready to sit down and talk about our plans with our staff on the upcoming Monday. We walked over to our neighboring brewery and with some giddiness, I said, "Hey y'all, we started a school!"

Toast 7: To This Team

Between the beginning of March and the beginning of June, we interviewed nearly 100 people to fill just five positions. While the nights and weekends were spent getting ready for board meetings, mini-camps, and marketing felt long and arduous, it was nothing in comparison to hiring. Hiring was a literal pain in the ass. Literal because we sat so much it began to hurt. We hired three teachers in the first month of the process and then it took us nearly four months to hire the next two. We would schedule interviews starting at four o'clock, just after we got done teaching for the day, and some evenings we would go until nine. There were also quite a few Saturdays when we spent three to four hours interviewing.

Initially, everything started out too good. We had a few really strong applicants in our pool right from the beginning and the very first person to apply was the very first person we hired. The interview started out a bit tenuous. Our applicant, Amanda, had gone to the school building, which was still a construction zone, while we were conducting interviews at the district office. By the time she showed up for her interview, she was incredibly frazzled and a little late. The first several questions she had a hard time answering and her answers were short without a lot of depth. We were pretty certain this interview was going to be a bust but by question number seven, things really started to pick up. Granted we only had 10 interview questions so there was not much time but, somehow, she did it. Once she started talking about her students and her teaching, we realized she was a passionate person who might be just right to be the first to join our team. By the time she walked out, we were unanimous about inviting her back for a second interview. The second interview in our process was different than our first.

While in our first interview, we merely asked questions, our second interview was much more interactive. We sent each candidate pictures of the space. It was a complete construction zone and I imagine it was incredibly hard to make anything out of it. We also sent an article from National Public Radio (Drummond, 2017) about how "Open space learning used to be all the noise, but now it's just noisy." All of us identified that open space learning might be a struggle and I wanted to be sure we learned from the mistakes of the 1970s and did not try to replicate something that did not work back then. Our question to her was to imagine what we would do with the open space and what might be some of the obstacles we would have to overcome. It

was intended to be a discussion and not a question that could be right or wrong. When Amanda showed up for the second interview, she had knocked it out of the park. She did not just have an answer to the question; she used the poorly taken pictures and constructed a drawing of what the space might look like. Some of the ideas from her picture are exactly how the space looks today. We needed people who could model outside of the box thinking for our students and who would have the ability to coach them in design thinking; she clearly could do both. And it was not just that she had good ideas and knew how to get them on paper that interested us, it was that she was open to having a discussion with us and giving us her ideas. We knew we wanted someone on our team who would contribute to the team and she seemed like that person. I called her that night to offer her the job and she accepted.

Hiring Peter was almost as easy. We interviewed him around the same time as Amanda and everything about him seemed perfect. He lived out of state and we had to conduct the interview via Skype. Having helped found his own school and with years of experience, he coached us and asked us challenging questions during his interview. His demeanor was also calm, easy, and unflappable as he rocked in his rocking chair throughout the interview. By the second interview, we all loved him. It was not incredibly professional but I texted him while the next interview was happening to let him know we were interested and would be in touch soon. With a huge teacher shortage happening, I knew schools would be in contact with him as well and we had already lost one candidate to a neighboring school between the hour we finished our interview and offered her the job. I was relieved he texted back that he was really interested too. When we finished our last interview that evening, we all called him on

speaker phone to tell him that pending background check, we wanted to offer him the job. It was such an exciting moment for all of us because we knew this was going to be a great fit.

In our quest to hire just five people, a handful of Peters, Amandas, and all the others who joined us afterwards made the long nights not so long. The conversations we had with these people improved our understanding of what the school would become and we grew in our conversations with them. There were also many people who might be great somewhere else but did not necessarily fit in our model. Sometimes, we knew right away in the interview and sometimes they knew it. Three people we offered jobs to ultimately told us it seemed overwhelming to teach that way and they felt more comfortable teaching in traditional schools. It was always a letdown but it was also refreshing that they identified that before getting into something that was too much for them. A number of applicants were maybe not fit to work in any school and there were many things we learned in the interview process.

For instance, relying on technology for interviews almost always made things worse. With Peter, our second hire, we were unable to get Skype to work and it took a long time to find another way to contact him. We lost about 25 minutes of the interview with Violet, our fourth hire, just trying to get connected via technology. Our experience with most people, though, was it was hard to read them on technology. Even when their answers seemed to fit, their affect often felt flat. I would venture to guess we passed up some solid candidates because of the barrier created by technology. Additionally, online interviews tended to run over and candidates' answers often droned on. My guess would be that it was difficult for them to read our expressions and social cues to

figure out when to stop. Violet was out of state but in her determination to get the position, she drove four hours in the snow to do a 30-minute interview face-to-face. That probably made all of the difference with her.

Elisha was our third hire and also an out of state candidate. With the Skype interviews, we really struggled to get a sense of who she was and what type of teacher she would be. It probably took us the longest to make a decision on her for that reason; in the end, we relied on her recommendations to make our decision. One of her references lived in Bali, and I talked to her via Skype one morning at five. Her words were "If you don't hire her, you are crazy!" I could not imagine a stronger recommendation. We all joined together in a room at Danica's house to call to offer her the job and she squealed in excitement. Moments like that felt really nice.

There was also one interesting interview with a candidate living in Costa Rica that showed why interviewing with technology could be hard. I thought I was the first to notice the bee and it turned out the candidate noticed me noticing the bee. As she answered, my eyes never left the bee flying around just 10 feet from us in Michael's house. She did not know what I was looking at; she just thought I was making faces at her answers until we all quickly darted from the screen when the bee dive-bombed us.

As we all fled, she asked, "Where did everyone go?" I explained the bee situation once Michael had it under control but the interview was lost. After that, nobody regained their composure. It was an interesting moment where what we were experiencing during the interview and what she was experiencing were two totally different environments; without joining the two, it was hard to truly connect with one another.

It was not just the platform that created rifts; sometimes, it was the questions we asked. One question in our interview process surprisingly weeded out a lot of people. I was astonished to learn that many of the teachers we interviewed did not understand the meaning of white privilege; it turned out that question was sort of pivotal for us. We asked every applicant, "Tell me your understanding of white privilege." One candidate whom we were interested in said, "I think it means that people think that just because I am white, I have privilege, but that's not true"; then she launched into the struggles she had growing up without any real acknowledgement of the meaning. Most candidates flinched at this question and several said, "Wow, that's a hard one." Ultimately, we did not hire anyone who did not understand it. While we did not realize at the time that it was a hinge question, it turned out that for the culture we were trying to create, it would not be possible for someone to fit in if they did not have at least a minimal grasp of it.

Another thing that completely surprised me was people lied on their applications. For example, on our school district application, a question asked if the applicant knew another language and to what extent. Several people marked they knew Spanish so we had a question that said, "I saw on your application that you speak a little Spanish. Would you mind if we asked you a question in Spanish?" Every person who marked that they knew Spanish said "yes" to this, although some a bit hesitantly. Danica then asked them a question about how they would communicate with families in Spanish. Only one of our teacher applicants who said they spoke Spanish was able to answer this question in Spanish--this was Amanda and one could answer the question in English because she at least understood what was being asked--this was Elisha who was our third hire. About 20 candidates marked they knew conversational Spanish but

did not know enough to comprehend a simple question asked very slowly. One woman

began to answer and then said, "Well I only know how to say some basic things like I

can tell a student if their homework is due on Marfres." We assumed she meant Martes

but even that was difficult. Then she said with a little giggle, "Just don't tell me

students I don't know Spanish because they all think I do." She openly admitted to

lying on her application and to her students right to us.

We had gone to the teaching fair at the local university and interviewed over 25

people in eight hours but did not find anyone who seemed to fit our model. The

students graduating from the university did not seem prepared for anything outside of

the traditional model; even when we handed them literature on our school model and

told them to read up prior to their interview, they really struggled to get the concept.

Moving into June, we were so burned out on interviewing and we still had one position

left to fill. While I had no plans to teach at the school, it was starting to look like I

might need to.

By June, Danica had a debilitating blood clot in her leg and was pretty much

confined to her couch and Michael was out of the country. We were trying to arrange

all interviews via Skype but with the delay of finding time to schedule interviews will

all three of us, we kept losing the most viable candidates to other schools who were

also in a mad dash to fill open spaces before the next school year.

James was a gift and quite accidental. I had been his supervising professor at

the university where he graduated with a degree in secondary theatre. He was from

Canada and it turned out he was having a hard time getting a job because his visa

expired before many schools ended their school year and school districts were not

really in the habit of getting work visas for teachers because of the cost. On June 16th,

he sent a message on Facebook asking for my advice. He was wondering if he should

move back to Canada or try to become a substitute for the year while working on

getting a green card. I immediately messaged back that I would like to talk to him and

scheduled a phone call. Later that afternoon, I called James and my first question was

"So you don't have a job yet?" He sounded disappointed and shared that it seemed too

late to get one this year but if he went back to Canada, there was a job waiting for him.

However, that was not what he wanted to do. I was not disappointed, though. I was

ecstatic. I knew this long hard process had just been leading us to James. His bubbly

personality, enthusiasm, and energy were exactly what we needed.

I listened for a few minutes to see what he was thinking and feeling before I

asked him if he had ever considered teaching elementary school. He was taken aback

by the question at first because he was not sure where I was headed but he shared how

much he had enjoyed teaching at an elementary summer camp and he had been

thinking more and more about teaching elementary school over the last month. I told

him about the school and he was genuinely excited about the possibility. Danica and I

scheduled an interview with him for a few days later and she liked him right away; she

immediately saw all of the things I had seen in him. Scheduling an interview with

Michael was a little harder because he was in South Africa at the time but we got that

set up eventually. Michael was less enthusiastic at first but I blamed that on the

technology veil; while we tended to shoot for consensus, a two out of three vote on an

applicant by the third week in June needed to suffice.

The one obstacle we had with hiring James was he was not licensed to teach elementary school; he was licensed to teach secondary theatre. He needed to study for and take the state test to be qualified to teach our upper elementary group and had to have a passing score before we hired him. The test was just a few weeks away from the date we interviewed him so there was not much time to study. Once he returned to the country, Michael worked with him on this because he had recently gone through this process as well. This ended up being a perfect pairing because the time they spent working together helped them develop a bond and in a very short amount of time, Michael could see exactly what we saw in James.

In the end, all of that time to find just the right team was truly worth it. We all finally met the last week of July and we were so excited to see how all of these individual pieces would fit together. We tried hard to hire a group of people that had a diverse set of skills and strengths but shared a common vision for education, which was likely what took so long. But getting them all in the same room together was really the test to see if it worked.

We had almost a month to bond before school started. The first week together was really awkward. Everyone was polite but quiet; while Peter was outgoing and willing to speak up, everyone else seemed to sit back and listen at our meetings and training. Often Danica, Michael, Peter, and I did all of the talking while the others took notes and listened. We planned outings together and lunches. We had plenty of team building by building furniture and designing the space; by the time I botched my speech at the ribbon cutting on August 2nd, we were all pretty gelled.

At the ribbon cutting, my job was to speak about the namesake and share why we decided to name it after him. After everyone spoke, I was handed the mike to turn everything over, I said a few more impromptu words about how excited Danica, Michael and I were and then invited everyone to join us for cake and tour the school. After seven really long days of getting the building together and learning about our new staff, I had forgotten to introduce them to our audience. For so long, it had been just the three of us. Every talk and presentation had been about what the three of us had done. Now there were nine of us including our office manager and I forgot to acknowledge it publicly. I spent the rest of the night thinking about that moment and wanting it back.

After the ribbon cutting, we had dinner reservations for all of our friends and family at a local restaurant to celebrate. Once everyone showed up and was seated with a drink in hand, I tapped my glass to start a toast. With glasses raised, I let them know how I felt like I messed up at the ribbon cutting, how everything people saw in that building was about the team sitting around this table, and how they all put it together over the last seven days. Through tears, I told them how the process to getting to this moment with this team around the table was so worth the wait because I knew we had the right team to tackle this first year together and that I was sorry that I did not acknowledge that publicly at the ribbon cutting. "To this team, who will change what education can look like!" I said and we found the glasses of our new teammates.

Toast 8: To the First Day of School

When I had my first child, there was so much build up about how beautiful the experience would be. I knew labor would be difficult but imagined at the end there would be this magical moment where my child and I would finally be cheek to cheek

and all of the difficulties of pregnancy and labor would disappear the instant I saw her sweet, angelic face.

This was not the reality. I was in labor for nearly three days and was so exhausted that I fell asleep during pushing contractions. My daughter inhaled meconium and was quickly swept off to the neonatal intensive care unit where she required oxygen. When she was finally released from the neonatal intensive care unit, she was examined and the doctor found a heart defect that required a cardiologist's input. I spent the first day of her life terrified, exhausted, and in disbelief. My first day at the school was nearly identical.

Before the doors opened, there had been this endless potential. We had planned meticulously to build this culture where students wanted to learn, teachers saw themselves as facilitators for that learning, and everyone grew immensely. We planned to have our staff begin training one month before the doors opened to work on culture building with our teachers. With the staff, we planned our first loop, Collaboration, to work on culture building with our students. I truly felt like the kids would truly value all the hard work we put into designing the school and providing them with a new experience. However, while we had all been immersed in the culture, they had not yet. They had zero buy-in from the beginning because to them this was just another school--one of many they had already tried. For some of them, they could not understand why their parents would even try to send them to school in a "garage."

Not knowing any of this yet, Danica and I stood on the threshold of the entrance so excited for our first day while Michael, in his bright orange vest, directed cars. A new teacher had put together a playlist for every day for the first month to be played as

we walked in so the song "Happy" played quietly as families brought their children into the gates. I had cleared my schedule and was so excited about what this day would hold, and then the students walked through the doors.

In most school years, teachers experience a "honeymoon period," a time when for a few weeks the students are too uncomfortable to behave in a way that would upset their teacher. While these honeymoons make easing into the year nice, they often come to a shocking end as students get more comfortable with their environment (Isenberg, 2014). Our honeymoon period lasted exactly five minutes. At our very first morning meeting, two older students, Samuel and Hugo, attempted to steal the show by grabbing the microphone and yelling over the voices of the collaborators trying to speak. The boys loved having a circle audience and shouted anything that would get attention. A younger student left morning meeting and headed for the front door--five minutes into school and we already had our first escape attempt.

By mid-morning, we had removed all of the flexible seating because students had been bouncing across the room or using the yoga balls as a weapon. The inflatable wiggle seats had a plastic plug that made an awesome projectile if one jumped on the seat; these projectiles were flying across the room all morning our first day. The collaborators looked exhausted by the time we walked to the park; one student had already had a melt down and threw everything on the floor in the tinker room. Restorative justice was coming in handy and as I walked through the school, many groups were engaged in circle time already.

During exploratory, everything seemed to implode. We had people in the building to teach exploratory who had never taught a day in their life and students, who

were loving the freedom and open space, were attempting to eat them alive. All of the collaborators were so exhausted that we locked ourselves in the kindergarten room and tried to help each other problem solve everything that went wrong that day. We looked like some type of army who had barely survived a battle. Well, everyone but Peter, a 30- year veteran teacher, who was so excited about the potential and as optimistic as always. About 20 minutes into our first break in the day, a student came to get us to let us know that the woodshop exploratory teacher and students were all locked in the woodshop. When we got there to let them out, we learned Samuel did not want to be in woodshop so he locked the teacher and all of the students in.

Danica and I were the only two without a class that day since kindergarten was on a delayed start. We walked around throughout the day shaking our heads in disbelief and saying, "This is so so bad!" or "What the hell did we do?" I left school that night a bit like Frankenstein; I was terrified of my own creation. Many of my toasts during this process, up to this point, had been celebrations but this time, I went home and drank a beer alone. I was so terrified of what the day had held. I went to bed hoping the next day would be a re-do. Instead it took seven weeks before we hit anything that resembled a stride and it was quite some time before another celebratory toast with friends.

Toast 9: To My Child

While it took a while for me to feel like we had success as a school, it did not take very long for me to start to see success with my own child. Within just a few weeks of being at the school, I could already see her learning important skills needed to live a fulfilled life. My oldest daughter, Morgan, has always been incredibly outgoing

and usually very loud at home. She is a non-stop performer, singing and dancing everywhere she goes around the house. However, her school persona was completely different.

From the time she was in preschool, her teachers would tell us, "She's so shy!" In front of other people, she rarely said a word. It took nearly four years for her to talk to one of my closest friends--one of the first people to hold her after she was born. As she got older and more comfortable with people, we assumed that at school she grew out of her shyness because at home she was so incredibly outgoing; however, in the winter of her third-grade year, we invited one of her school friends, Melanie, over to play and learned that was not the case.

After school, Morgan came tearing through the house, being her normal loud and goofy self. Melanie was shocked by what felt like out-of-character behavior from Morgan. She looked at me and said, "Is Morgan always like this at home?" I knew she was shyer at school but I did not quite understand just how much. I said that she was and then asked, half knowing the answer, "Is she not like this at school?" Melanie looked surprised and replied, "No! Morgan never talks at school." Then Morgan said something that as a parent stunned me because I knew it to be the experience of so many children, "Yeah, at school I sometimes feel invisible." I could not believe that my child, to whom we frequently say the phrase "Morgan, volume!" because she is so loud, felt invisible at school.

Her feelings of being invisible were confirmed in late March when her teacher called me in unexpectedly for a conference. She wanted to inform me that Morgan's 504 did not specify extra time on assignments and because of that, she felt she was

enabling her by giving her the extra time she needed, specifically to do math. We actually did not notice her 504 did not have extra time because every teacher she ever had from kindergarten on knew Morgan was academically fine, but a slow processor, so they gave her that accommodation regardless of her 504. This was the first teacher to state she did not want to give it to Morgan. At the conference, she said it was not fair that Morgan got more time to complete her work and she even insinuated that we were helping her too much at home when her work was not completed at school. We were not helping too much at home but Morgan was just more successful when she had more time to process.

Frustrated by her lack of compassion for my child's learning difficulty, I looked at her and said, "Do you know anything Morgan is good at?" She was taken aback at the question and then stammered a bit, "Um, what do you mean?" I asked again, "You seem to notice that she struggles in school, but do you know what her strengths are?" Here we were seven months into the school year and she could not name one thing my daughter could do well. At this point, Morgan had been playing the flute for about two and a half years and could play almost any tune she heard by ear. She has an incredible voice and nearly perfect pitch but math and reading had always been hard for her. I knew now why my child felt invisible. Her teacher did not even see her: she was just a set of scores on reading and math tests; she was a burden because she needed accommodations; and she was a guaranteed low score on the standardized test because her 504 did not state she needed extra time.

Now she was going to be coming to the school and I was hopeful she would finally be seen. Before school started, we had conferences for the students and parents

to meet the collaborators--and the collaborators to get to know the students. We had actually planned and set these up based on my experience with Morgan's previous school. I did not want any student at our school to ever feel invisible. Morgan met with Peter a few weeks before school had started and she seemed easy and comfortable with his presence. Peter was floored when I told him Morgan had usually been very shy at school. He only saw the Morgan we knew and immediately identified her as a leader.

Once school started, it was as though he did not even notice her struggles; in his classroom, she was Morgan--the leader. It might have been because we spent quite a bit of time in the building prior to school opening that she always felt so at home at school but I also cannot help but to think it was Peter's belief in her and the small size of the school that helped her feel and act more like she did at home.

Just one month into school and my child who "never talks at school!" was leading a whole school meeting in front of all of the students and by month two she was playing the role of Cinderella in the play. So far this year, she has run for student council and delivered a speech to the student body, played a lead role in the school play, had a solo in the choir concert, spoke comfortably and assertively to a large public audience about her projects at museum nights, and led all of the students in multiple schoolwide meetings, often being the first to volunteer in her group. Additionally, the confidence has given her a boost academically and now she has also read her first chapter book despite always being a reluctant reader. Her success on the statewide test will ultimately be what matters to the state and the school district. But for me, I have a child who has gained more confidence in one year than can ever be measured by any test; I cannot help but to think the research is true and this will serve

her much better for whatever she decides to do. In this moment while writing this, I just have my coffee mug but I raise it in celebration for my own child and her opportunity to grow as a whole person.

Toast 10: To Building the Plane While Flying It

Our first student to leave due to educational programming was a boy named George. He was in the fifth grade at the school and struggled from the very first day. At our very first community meeting, he tried to take the microphone away from Michael. He stood in the middle with the lead collaborators and kept speaking while we were speaking. We had been ready for a lot of things but we were not ready for a boy like George. All of us tried in a variety of ways to find ways to connect with him. I, for instance, had a plan that every morning after community meeting he would help me make coffee for the collaborators. He loved to help and because his parents owned a breakfast restaurant, he was actually really good at making coffee.

George also loved cars and football and was willing to do just about anything to spend time learning about these two things so we would often try to link the lessons for him to the things he cared about. George did require special education services but because we did not have a consistent special education teacher in the beginning, he often was not getting the services he needed; we all quickly identified this as being a part of his struggle. We attempted to make a ton of accommodations for him during his time at the school, one of them being that he spent part of the day doing his work in the kindergarten classroom. Because the kindergarten classroom was the only room in the building with a door, we thought doing his work in a more contained space might be helpful for him. This, unfortunately, worked really well. It quickly became apparent

that an open-spaced environment would not be a successful place for George to do his learning.

When George tried to learn in the open space, it typically became a distraction for all of the other students. It was not unusual for George to go storming through the building yelling and throwing things because he was frustrated with the freedom. Once he was in the kindergarten room, the only room with walls and a door, he generally regained his composure and settled in. More than once, we had to clear an area because he had become a danger to himself or others. Because we went to recess at the park, there were times we could not bring him because he was a flight risk; there were times other groups had to miss brain break because he was in the courtyard swearing and throwing things.

It quickly became apparent to all of us that our school was not a good fit for this child. He was not learning, he was not thriving, and he was making it increasingly harder for other kids to learn and thrive. We met with the family several times to try to come up with a plan; in a last-ditch effort to try to get things to work, the family provided us a volunteer who would be available daily for half a day as a one-on-one support for George. We decided to try this for two weeks to see if it could help and to see if it could create a sustainable situation for George to work in our environment. For two weeks, the volunteer showed up each day and tried to work with George but she quickly grew tired of trying to support him in the environment. One day while she was trying to work with him, he threw a tantrum and began throwing supplies around the school. Then he went outside and kicked all of the balls onto the roof and tried to climb the gate.

We were supposed to meet with the family on a Monday and our plan was to recommend re-enrolling him back at his home school. However, a meeting was not necessary. The Friday at the end of the two weeks, the family kept him home from school and by Monday he had returned to his former school. This was a hard blow for all of us. We knew in our core that this model of education might not work for all kids but the idealist in me did not want to believe that. I knew it was best for him to go but admitting that also felt like we had failed somehow. When we talked to the principal at the school he transferred to, he was doing great back at his former school. There had been no discipline issues and being in a confined classroom space with the appropriate services really helped him settle in.

The second student to leave our school due to educational programming was a boy named Chaz. Chaz was in our lower grade group and was curious and kind; he loved to share and at the age of six already professed his love to a number of girls. He also loved bugs, exploring, and playing with his friends. His mother, though, never looked comfortable in our building. Chaz's mother was "cool" with jet black hair and stylish clothes. Chaz came to school every day dressed in bow ties and sweaters with coordinating socks. His floppy hair was trendy and he looked like he was off the cover of a Gap Kids catalog. This was relevant in that the only draw I could imagine for his mother for a school like ours was that it looked "cool." Her actual beliefs about how education should look seemed very grounded in tradition. She also really loved order, quiet, and organization. Our school was frequently loud, chaotic, and messy. We gave children the freedom to explore, to create, and even to argue. Our philosophy was that we wanted children to develop social skills by not controlling every aspect of their

environment. Her philosophy was that a controlled environment was the path to academic success.

Now, to be fair, Chaz's collaborator had a rough landing into the school year. She had come from the preschool world and mostly looked terrified the first six weeks of school. There was not a lot of clear instruction going on and frequently chaos ensued in her grade. Also, to be fair, it was mostly terrifying for everyone the first six weeks of school. But once we hit week seven, she hit her groove just like most of us did. But Chaz's mom was not having it. The first meeting with his mother was about lunch time. She was very concerned about lunch time because she believed it was very unsafe.

Children would spend lunch time climbing on the fence and chasing each other around. As she told me these things, her child was chasing another girl around in circles in the parking lot pulling her by the backpack; the irony seemed lost on her. She explained her frustration with one particular anecdote that really highlighted why our school was definitely not a good fit for what she wanted for Chaz. A week prior to our conversation, Chaz broke his lunch box during lunch. I asked her if a student had stepped on it or if a ball had bounced on it but she explained that he broke it by hitting it up against the wall several times in a game he was playing. Clearly outraged, she said in her Pittsburgh accent, "Don't younz even watch and ask them to sit and quietly eat their lunch; I mean he did not even eat his lunch that day!" In our school if a child breaks a lunch box, our belief is he should be taught to not break his lunch box. This might be done by having the kid take personal responsibility by working to pay for a new lunch box or by fixing the broken lunch box or even by making a new lunchbox until he could afford to replace the broken one; this is called the repair. Our belief is

children will learn to take responsibility for their actions when they are given the tools and time to think about how to fix their own problems; her belief was we were responsible for his actions. She wanted us to control the environment instead of teaching him how to behave appropriately in the environment.

The second meeting with Chaz's mom was at our school accountability committee. She attended, I thought, to be involved. That was not her actual intention. She attended to grill us on our educational program. First, she targeted the reading program. While her husband looked over her shoulder, she judgingly asked, "Well how do I know he is even learning?" I started first. Since I taught in the literacy department at the local university, I thought I might have a bit of ethos. I told her all about our reading program. I explained that we chose it because it focused on learning to love to read first and then helped develop the skills connected to reading. The program is research-based and intentionally slow as it helps students develop skills linked to meaningful reading, instead of just fast reading, like the direct instruction programs at the other schools. I let her know that results in testing would also be slow as well because the tests focus on speed but that it was okay because this program was about developing lifelong readers, not just students who could perform on a test. She looked skeptical, and Chaz's father scowled.

Every school accountability committee has a member from the community as well. Our community member happened to be a university professor named Lynette whose focus was in elementary literacy. She sensed the skepticism and jumped in since my ethos was clearly not enough. Her explanation started with "When I heard they were using this program, I got chills!" She proceeded to clarify all of the benefits of

what we were doing and how Chaz would benefit because of it. Lynette then cited research, personal experience, and rationales for everything. Chaz's mom looked at her and said, "Yeah, but how will I know he is learning anything?" She wanted Chaz to be tested frequently and she wanted worksheets and papers to come home weekly. She wanted traditional school. Two weeks after that meeting, she pulled Chaz from our school and sent him back to her neighborhood school. To be honest, I did not miss seeing her around because I felt like I was walking on eggshells or trying to sugarcoat everything when talking to her. It felt to me like she was judging each and every move by every teacher in the building.

Losing Chaz, though, was hard for us. He was really thriving in the school. In fact, on his math assessment, a test she would have valued but never saw, he had shown nine months of growth in just six weeks' time; however, it seemed incongruous to our model to judge his success by test results. Also, despite his parents' frustration, he seemed happy at school and appeared to love the freedom to explore and the empowerment.

Experiencing what we went through with Chaz and George created a reflection point for us. Chaz was pulled just a couple weeks after George with a Friday being his last day. That afternoon, we went across the parking lot to our usual spot to try to figure out how to prevent things like this from happening in the future. In our conversation, we realized it would be very important to be clear with families about what the educational experience was going to look like in our school. In our information sessions, we had tried to be honest with parents about what our school would look like but in attempting to recruit and meet the numbers we had promised, we likely glossed

over things or minimized things that were actually core to who we were. For instance, in describing to Chaz's parents what our school was going to look like, they imagined order, quiet, and organization. This had clearly been a failure in communication on our part. We decided that in the future, we would ask all interested families to come visit our school. As the point person for enrollment, I planned to schedule these visits at 2 pm whenever possible. This was our craziest time of day and if they came in at 2 pm and it still seemed like a good fit, then we knew our school might be the right place for them. We toasted to this new plan, "To building the plane while flying it!", and moved forward.

Toast 11: To Bruno (Part 1)

I am actually writing this one on the eve of an important meeting because tomorrow we might be losing a student. Bruno had been identified as having significant needs for mental health. Outside of school, he met with both a psychologist and a psychiatrist and his behavior plan called for 200 minutes of psychological services provided by the school per month. We only have a school social worker in our building for about six hours per week and she has a caseload of 15 students. Obviously, it was been mathematically impossible to meet his needs.

We also got off to a slow start in supporting him because of issues stemming from our support staff. For instance, our appointed special education teacher had never met with him prior to October 17 and then had a run in with him on that date. The next day, she sent an email stating, "I am meeting with [my boss] tomorrow about safety concerns regarding [Bruno]." We had to force our way into this meeting; at it, the special education teacher who had avoided this student from day one suggested Bruno

be pulled from our school and put into a behavior intensive classroom because she did not think we could meet his Individualized Education Program (IEP) at our school. We had lost George because our school was not a good fit for him but with Bruno, we felt this was exactly where he needed to be. Several exchanges attempted to layout a safety plan but all meetings regarding this plan were cancelled until October 30th when we received an email asking for an IEP meeting with his neighborhood school. It felt to us like the school district was trying to take away our student without our say. We had asked for more support and more consistent support but we did not say we were unable to meet this child's needs.

Bruno was a difficult kid to have in our building most days but he was our difficult kid. Perhaps we had some blind spots to what would be best for him but that was only because he was having the best school year of his childhood so far. He had only been sent home once; we got through most days without having to call his mother and his mom was really happy. When a coordinator from the special education department contacted Bruno's mom, she explained to her that there was a conversation about sending him to a school that had full-time psychological services and special education services on their campus. His mother explained that at our school was the first time Bruno was doing "well" in school and his instances of physical aggression had even decreased at home. She said it was the first-time teachers had ever "taken the time to develop a relationship with [him] and connected with him." We had some really rough moments, for sure, like the time Bruno refused to come back from the park and then ripped the twinkle lights down from the public park trees; however, we did not feel like we had a chance to explore all the possibilities first. It felt like the

conversation around moving Bruno stemmed from outside of us, instead of from within us, and that felt awful. We did not want to be seen as the school who sent away difficult students; in fact, we wanted to be a beacon to them. Additionally, this student had a connection to us and our school, and we knew a transition would be terrible for him.

Bruno is in a small group that I run to work on social emotional skills. Prior to this day, he said to me "Miss, did you know they are going to make me go to a different school?" I said, "Well, we will see about that. How do you feel about that?" "I don't like it. This is the best school I've ever been to and I am trying to be really good here," he said in the monotone tone he tended to take when something got emotional.

I am not sure if we will keep Bruno; I guess I will know for sure tomorrow but if we do not, this would be a failure for us and for the system. Here is a kid who by most definitions is not thriving in school but by his definition and his mom's definition he is; instead of making the services available for him in the environment that works for him, we will have to transition him somewhere new because that is where the services are. I guess this situation leaves me questioning a system that has to survive by doing the best it can with what it has even if that "best" is just about being adequate for the student.

I did not really toast to this situation tonight but I have been worrying a lot. I talked to my husband over dinner about my frustration and tried to figure out what my steps should be at tomorrow's meeting. Do I let the special education department determine what is best for this kid, knowing they may know better than me? Do I go with my gut instinct and assure them that we think our school is the best place for Bruno? Is it arrogant of me to think I know what is best for someone else? Tonight, at

dinner with a glass of water in my hand, I raised my glass. "Well we'll see what happens!" I said with a defeated tone.

Toast 12: To Museum Night

The lead up to museum night in November was literal chaos. I would walk into the buildings most days to find students sprawled all across the floor gluing, taping, building, and making a giant mess. In the woodshop, saws were buzzing through the building and middle school students were behind the building spray painting and hammering. Everywhere, students were engaged in "project-based learning" but I was not even sure there was learning as it mostly just looked like projects. I honestly had absolutely no idea what would happen or if we were even going to pull this off.

On the day of museum night, the building was still a disaster. A week of project design, coupled with not having a janitor, coupled with kids who still were not the best at cleaning up after themselves, and we had a perfect storm. By five o'clock that evening, our school was supposed to be like a museum, pristine with clean exhibits. We had advertised it in the newspaper and it was listed as a stop on our city's First Friday Art Walk. This was done to hold us accountable to producing high quality work. Our students knew the public would be walking through to see their projects and we hoped this would motivate them into action. However, at 10 am on Friday, November 3rd, I was having some serious doubts we were going to have anything worth showing but I was starting to have a great fear that we were going to face public embarrassment.

By the afternoon, this fear started to subside. Students began cleaning up the space and the objects that looked like junk on the floor were becoming fully formed exhibits. Kids were racing all over the building trying to put finishing touches on their

work but they were also helping each other once they were finished. Then I watched a fifth-grade girl who was finished with her project helping a sixth-grade boy glue pictures on a poster board; his project was only half way done because he said, "I spent too much time messing around with my friends." I realized (possibly for only the third or fourth time in 12 weeks) that we were doing something right. In this moment, I remembered we had not given out a single grade yet. Students were not rushing to complete their work for As, Bs, or Cs. They were working out of pride in themselves and for the school community; we had the start of a culture. In a school where students did not feel measured and there was no competition, what motivated the students was pride, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation.

We opened our doors at five o'clock to a flood of people. While we only had 120 students, by 6:15, 200+ adults had come into the building. The school looked awesome and the students were amazing with their exhibits. Even though they were only asked to stand by their exhibit for one hour (again, for no grade or reward at all), most students stayed for the full two hours talking about their projects because they wanted to. I walked around asking students to tell me about their work. The first learning loop was Headspace and students had been learning about learning. In doing that, they either explored the brain, the way humans learned, or they learned something new to exhibit.

The most exciting experience of the night for me was when I approached a fifth-grade student who had taught herself sewing for her project. The project itself was unimpressive; she had made a very simple doll dress. However, in explaining her project to me, she rattled off every way in which she had failed, reflected on her failure,

and how she learned and grew from it. For instance, she explained to me, "One way I failed was that I did not listen to my collaborator, Peter. He sent me videos and articles to help me but I thought I would be fine on my own. I learned that sometimes we need help from other people to be successful." I got teary-eyed listening to this because to me there was not much learning more important than failing, reflecting on it, and figuring out how to improve the next time--and that is exactly what she had demonstrated she had learned.

Museum night was the first time I felt success--the first opportunity to show that what we were doing was working. We had students who were passionate to share their learning with no incentive. No grade was attached--no pass/fail. We had a culture where the expectation was to show what you learned and the students were beginning to be invested. Board members, the superintendent, and influential community members walked through our building that night and every single one explained how impressed they were by our students' work. Almost all of our students were confident and comfortable talking about their learning and presenting their projects. Parents told me they teared up as they walked through and saw what the students were able to do; I did not admit it but I did too. For the first time, it felt like our vision was being realized and that it was possible others might see it too.

As a staff, we walked across the parking lot to our neighboring pub. I was exhausted from the long day, the energy of it all, and all of the social interaction with parents and community members; however, there was nowhere else I wanted to be in that moment than celebrating with these people I worked with every single day. One of

the families from the school was at the pub and bought all of us a round to celebrate the night and we raised our glasses

> It has been a long twelve weeks, perhaps the longest of my life, but here we are. Our kids were amazing, 200 people showed up, and we are changing education for these kids and these families. Here's to us! It's only going to get better from here.

Toast 13: To Being Someone Else's Brightworks

At the beginning of April, we did not really have a gauge of how far we had come in our first year until we were visited by a large group of educators from the Northeast who were interested in starting their own school. This group was traveling with an organization funded through Carnegie Foundation grant money to visit different types of schools. We still were not exactly sure how they had heard of us but we welcomed the visit since visiting schools had been such an important piece to us in our own design process. Their goal, they said, was to hear about our design journey of how we got to the current point.

Danica, Michael, and I really enjoyed sitting down together, reflecting, and putting together a presentation of our process. It seemed like we had just started this whole journey and yet mapping it out, I started to realize how far we had really come. It was interesting for us to think about what they might ask or what the kids might say as they walked around. We also needed to have a student panel for them to ask questions. I quickly picked 10 of our middle school students to participate in the panel but there was no way to keep it authentic and also prepare them for what they might be asked. First, we did not even know what they would be asked and second, we wanted to hear their honest answers about how they were feeling about the school.

In the two hours the educators were at the school, we presented about our design overview, they toured the building and talked to the students, and then there was the student panel. Everything went so smoothly. They asked us great questions in our design overview and it was such a nice perspective to be able to say, "Here is how we are implementing that!" This was a new response from past presentations where our answer was "Here is what we will try to do." We were no longer trying--now we were doing. And based on the student responses, we were doing it well.

When they toured the building, our students were so amazing. They were excited to share their learning and even summoned the guests over to show them what they were working on. As we walked around interacting with the other school designers, so many of them mentioned how clearly our students could talk about their learning and how articulate and engaged our students were in their learning. They all mentioned how hands-on everything was and how deep the learning appeared to be. I was instantly brought back to the day at Brightworks when I saw what was so inspiring to me and saw a version of education that I did not know was possible because I had only read about it. I knew we were not there yet and I knew we still had a long way to go but it felt pretty good to think for a bit that we might be someone else's "Brightworks."

I was so elated by the time we got to the student panel and I really could not imagine things going any better. Then our students began to speak. The first question asked of the panel was "How is this school different than your former school?" There was a ton of expected answers: "We have more freedom" and "We are responsible for what we make and how we show our learning." These elements were a part of our

design but it was also reaffirming to hear that the students saw it as well. Then one sixth grade boy said something that brought me to tears: "My old school felt like a prison but this school feels like art." My knees buckled at the poetry in this statement and everyone made an audible sound. One designer asked the kids, "What is one thing they do here that you think people opening other schools should learn from?" Again, there were some expected answers that were part of our programming like "Let kids fail" or "Really pay attention to each individual kid." We had tried to create an atmosphere that valued success through failure and student's individual needs, yet hearing their answers affirmed us that we were on the right track. However, there were also answers that surprised us like when one of our sixth-grade girls said, "Don't overthink it. Let there be problems so the kids can fix them." We wanted students to feel ownership for the design and creation of their learning environment but it was really hard to quantify if they actually felt it.

We were just six weeks away from the last day of school and the change from the beginning of the year suddenly felt immense. As people left, their compliments about what we had designed made me feel like we had made an impact. It seemed like it was possible that we had planted a seed that was going to help someone else shape their vision just like other schools had done for us. After school, we all walked over to our little brewery and raised our glasses, "To being someone's Brightworks!"

In the summer before year two, this organization emailed us and asked if they could tour twice this year. In the email, the director of the organization wrote an email asking to return again this year. In it she said, "We have a new crop of design leaders

from New England and your visit was one of the strongest design journeys that we've heard about (and we've been doing this work nationally for five years!).”

Toast 14: We Survived and Thrived in Year One

After our last Friday, we all walked over to the brew pub. The day had been full of celebrations and we were smiling and exhausted. We had our school-wide barbecue that day and we were gearing up for eighth grade graduation in the afternoon. As I walked through the courtyard with children laughing and eating their burgers, hot dogs, and veggie burgers, I could sense the joy. This did not feel like the kind of joy that came from having a break from the norm but a joy that came from spending time with people you cared about in a community you cared about. Our students seemed truly happy. Our staff seemed truly happy.

Eighth grade graduation confirmed this feeling about joy that came from loving your community. Each student identified an adult to speak on his or her behalf while they sat on a stool and listened. The speeches were sweet anecdotes about what impact the student made on the school and as the speeches were read, I noticed tears everywhere. These were not just tears from the students who were being spoken about and they were not just tears from the parents; many of the other students watching graduation were crying too. Only six students would be leaving us this first year but for the other students, that was a major part of the school. When I asked kids why they were crying, they all shared stories that explained how these six kids were an integral part of the school community and they were leaving. They were the buddies who walked them to the park, who put on their stage makeup for the musical, who read to them during buddy reads. They were their friends and mentors when they had struggles

and their guides when they needed help finishing projects. The younger kids were truly sad to lose anyone from our community.

When the day was done, we sent our crying students home to their families, explaining that they were emotional about graduation. Parents beamed, amazed their kids cared about the other students. We cleaned up quickly and made the trek across the parking lot to the brew house. As we all got our beverages, some with beer, some with soda, and some with water, we raised our glasses, "To crying children!" I joked. We all laughed knowing that "crying children" was actually a celebration. We made the goal of our first year about building community and this care for one another was a huge marker of our success.

Toast 15: The Gut Punch

After a few months into the first year, we had completely written off any hopes to succeed on the first year's test. We had a number of students at our school who had not done well in traditional school—that was why they were at our school in the first place. If it had been working for them before, they never would have moved. There was one class of 25 students where more than half of the class had an IEP, 504, or the Reading to Ensure Academic Development plan; many of the students had significant emotional needs and this was the *only* group whose data counted toward our school performance framework because the sample size in the middle school was too small. Then there was the fact that we did not really prep for testing--no practice tests, no practice questions, and, as a school, we did very little actual "testing." We also were not a very high-tech school. There was plenty of evidence of a mode effect (Herold, 2016) in which students who use computers less at school and home do worse on

computerized testing; the state standardized test was completely computer based. I also truly believed our plan was always meant to be a long game approach wherein we estimated it would take around four years for our system to show significant amounts of growth and that the first two years would be about creating an environment where students were empowered to learn. I knew all of this. Yet, receiving our first school performance framework was still a gut punch.

I was prepared but no matter how much you prepare, the words "turnaround status," the worst rating you can get, still stung. Michael, Danica, and I were the first to see the data and we met at a breakfast place to plan for year two; we discussed how we were going to share this with staff. We expected bad test results as most brand-new schools get bad test results; we told them all along that we expected bad test results; we asked them to trust us and the system and to plan for the long game. We wondered, would this mean they would stop trusting us? Would they revert to old ways based on the test scores? We came up with a plan we thought would work and toasted our great idea.

Our plan was to protect our teachers from overreacting to test scores by only sharing our test results after four days of intense grounding in our school's mission as a way to remind everyone what comes first. We really homed in on how to teach in a way more closely linked to our mission and not move away from it. Our first loop planning went well and our essential questions and planned activities were strong. We also only spent 30 minutes looking at test scores as a group and explained that we were not considering these scores to be a valid measure of the growth our students had in the first year since they had grown in so many ways that could not be measured on a test.

We truly thought our plan was going to work. Yet, as I wrote this, we were one week into our second year and I felt like I could see the difference the test scores had on the staff. We had staff members who were moving to more traditional forms of education, moving away from the mission, and instituting more authoritarian structures. While the first year was about fighting the pressure to get good test scores from the outside and performing for the test, the struggle we seemed to face in year two might be about fighting that pressure from the inside as our teachers reacted to the impact of the test scores. As a leader, I found myself quickly responding to this and trying to schedule observations and data team meetings to have a continual process of grounding the collaborators in the mission and vision of the school but I was also torn by the desire to create a school that allowed for staff autonomy.

Toast 16: To Bruno (Part II)

Last October, we had to meet with our district's special education team to determine whether or not a student in our school would have to transfer to another school because they had more special education services available. It ended up being an incredibly heated conversation. Peter and I showed up to the meeting and it seemed as though everything had been decided. The special education department made very clear that what students with special needs needed was structure and what our school lacked was structure. Bruno's mom spoke out against this and said it was actually the choice and freedom that was helping Bruno thrive in our school but they disregarded her comments and continued to tell her about the environment he needed and what the structures of the school day looked like at this other school. She continued to explain hat structure would not meet her kid's needs and would actually create a worse

situation for him. We went back and forth for a long while; Peter and I made it very clear that we were able to make whatever accommodations necessary to keep Bruno in a place where he was doing okay. Throughout the conversation, there was a ton of tension in the room between two parties who thought they knew what was best for this kid buy disagreed on what that was. Ultimately, the special education department admitted they were not able to make this decision without the mother's consent, which she did not give; with that, Bruno is still with us in year two.

It has now been nearly one year since that conversation and it has been great that Bruno was able to stay with us. Lots of reasons are why I am glad Bruno is still with us but my favorite reason is "the letter." Two weeks ago, Bruno noticed a younger kid who was struggling at school. This boy, Devin, was finding it difficult to follow directions; he was being mean to classmates to push them away; and he was refusing to do any work.

Bruno decided to sit down and write him a letter to let him know why this was not a good choice. In the letter Bruno wrote, "Now I get flashbacks sometimes of what I did and it makes me cry it hurts (sic)."

In his letter, he was trying to coach Devin by sharing his own experience and what he learned from last year. He talked about the school and how the teachers "actually care" about the students and told Devin to do well in school and treat the teachers well because the school was important. He also reflected on how his behavior the previous year had impacted the school.

Things were by no means perfect this year. We did not cure Bruno of his mental health issues and there were days where he struggled more than others.

However, he has become more aware of the impacts his choices make on others and his value for the school, especially after almost having to leave last year, has truly helped mitigate most of the extreme behaviors. I took a picture of the letter to carry it with me. I wanted to have it to remind me of the impact we could have when we provide students with caring adult relationships and help them to feel a part of their school.

As a staff, we went across the parking lot that day to celebrate how great we were feeling about the second year. Things had changed so much from this same point a year before for both us and our students. This toast was for the staff who created an environment where kids like Bruno could feel like they had a home at school and even become protective of that home. "To year two," I said with real joy about what this year might hold for us all.

Toast 17: #Adifferentkindofschool

In September of our second year, we had to attend a board meeting to explain how our students would improve on the test in our second year. To prep for the board meeting, we were asked to meet with the district leadership team where they were supposed to ask us questions to prepare. The questions were things like "Have you considered doing more test prep?" and "Do you need any digital platforms that mimic the test so your students can prepare?" We left there fairly astonished. The questions were not about how our students were learning or what they were learning. The whole meeting was simply an analysis of data and questions about test preparation. We had had no idea what to expect at the board meeting, or what their expectations were, but now we knew their expectations were solely connected to data.

We showed up at the board meeting in our matching t-shirts with our new hashtag on the back; #Adifferentkindofschool had become our motto. When a student used taxidermy on a rat for a project, we laughed and commented, "#Adifferentkindofschool!" When our students staged a protest about equity, we said, "#Adifferentkindofschool." Often this was our comment when anything happened that might not happen in a traditional school. So here we were at the start of year two, trying to defend ourselves against traditional measures in our t-shirts to remind everyone that we were not actually like anyone else.

It was a painful meeting. We had to sit back and listen while district level leadership who had no understanding of our model tried to explain it in traditional terms. There were comments about test scores and comments about the size of the N but there was no true understanding of the incredible growth our students had made. The person giving the presentation had only been in our building once with students present and it had been over a year before when we were still in chaos mode.

The toast came after this meeting. We got our drinks at the local pizza restaurant. It was not a celebration--instead, it was in solidarity. We were in this together and while we did not know what was next or how we were going to stand up to the system, we knew we were going to do it together. As we tapped our glasses together, we said nothing; we just nodded our heads with a defiant grin, knowing that somehow, we were going to help change the system.

Toast 18: An Awkward Cheer

The day after the board meeting, an article ran in the paper. It was very matter of fact, stating we had plans to get student scores up but that the district would close us

if we did not. A concerned parent took a picture of the article and commented on our

family Facebook page, "What's the plan for the school?" I realized we needed to make

some type of public statement so I sat down and began to write. I noticed people were

commenting, and I was cringing to think what might be said before we had a chance to

explain ourselves. I finished the letter and had Michael and Danica give it a quick run

through, hoping I was in time to do damage control. It turned out there was no need for

damage control. If anything, ever said that we were heading in the right direction, it

was this. The outpouring from parents was quick and strong.

 The following are just a few comments shared by our parents on our pages

and via text message in the 12 hours that followed:

> Evie just told me she signed up to run for Student Council President. That isn't really a role I would typically think she would jump into, especially at a new school. When I asked her why she decided on that position, this is what she said, "Well, I was kind of shy and didn't think I could do a lot of things at my old school. But I've broken through that barrier. At this school, I know I can do anything I set my mind to!" Seriously. Those are her words, not mine. Further proof that a different kind of school is EXACTLY what this little learner needed! Thank you! (Mother of a fourth grader)

> My hope is that "the plan" is for us as parents to continue supporting the amazing collaborators and people running our school to help the social, academic and emotional growth that I've seen in my kiddo the last year. I hope the plan is to stick with the model that TSOI was created on and continue to not be part of the traditional American schooling norms that have gotten us where we are today. My hope is that the plan is to care more about our little humans and their learning styles and growth than we care about test scores. (Mother of a first grader)

> I personally was skeptical when the wife wanted to enroll our son but that skepticism was solely based on the "traditional" and what I like to refer to as "indoctrinated" methodology of learning I've been exposed to for many a year growing up. But now after this first year, I am very proud to have my son be a part of the school and look forward to the coming years as they continue to challenge my son and his abilities to explore, learn and INNOVATE. (Father of a sixth grader)

As a parent with a child with a learning disability I know what a struggle it can be to find a proper school in which my child can learn. I can say with 100% certainty that his needs were not being met in a traditional school. I have a child who is extremely smart but the Traditional school was just not the place for him. The standard guidelines they want all children to be in was just causing him to fail horribly in a District 6 School. I have full confidence that I made the best decision moving my child to [this school]. I've seen a complete turnaround in his ability to comprehend what's being taught due to the methods the school uses versus the traditional way. He's now at grade level and thriving. I also have my other two children there who also attended a district school and they can't stop talking about the differences they see from their old school to this one. I've seen grades come up and they love going to school. The effort, time, patience and willingness each and every one of the collaborators makes with the kiddos makes a huge difference in my opinion. (Mother of a sixth grader)

These were just four of the over 40 positive comments shared on our Facebook page; there were no negative comments. Individual collaborators also received texts of support from parents and a common theme surrounded stories of how their kids grew in incredible ways that could not be measured on a test and the actions they were willing to take. Within two hours of the article being posted, the journalist who wrote it received at least five emails from our parents. The parents had already scheduled to present in front of the board at the next public meeting and they had begun to post their support for us on their own social media. I had worried that we might be sunk by the negative press; I imagined parents lining up the next morning to pull their kids out of the school but the negative press actually created a situation where the parents rallied around us and showed their support.

We were at school as this all unfolded and there was nothing to toast. We stood in our closet of a staff room and put our hands in the middle and decided our cheer would be #Adifferentkindofschool. "Okay, ready, on three," we all fumbled with the words and laughed. We were decidedly better at toasts but it felt nice having something to celebrate in the midst of this.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was an analysis of my experiences in designing and opening a school. My goal in using autoethnography was to examine my own personal growth during the process of changing a system I was a part of. Using my own experiences, the purpose of the study was to discover the ways in which my responses and actions were situated in my own historical background with education and as a reaction to this background. Additionally, I was looking to see how effective I was at resisting the pressures of the standards movement in order to implement a model of education that was aligned with research. This chapter offers a brief overview of the autoethnography as well as a summary and analysis of major findings in relation to my research questions and literature review. I also pose recommendations for future research and further explore the limitations of this study.

Overview of the Study

Education has been "reforming" for nearly 100 years and yet, somehow in that time, very little has changed. The literature was substantive and diverse on what is needed for a student to be motivated and engaged in the learning process; yet, it seemed the research did not often inform the field of education. From my experience, it felt like standardized testing ha created a block to transformation in education because schools, educators, and systems were afraid to innovate in ways that might not be

quantifiable on standardized tests. While there was a significant foundation in the literature about what schools should do to change, there was a lack of real-world examples of what happened when someone tried it. This autoethnography explore my journey of responding to the literature and taking action as a person who was both a product and a member of the very system I was trying to change. The analysis of the vignettes was to "make public the historical dimensions of [this] dilemma and confronting it as a difficulty to work through." In this analysis, I addressed the vignettes through the following research questions:

Q1 What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

Q2 In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

Q3 What can I learn from confronting the dilemmas that exist from my own historical experiences in education?

I explored these questions through autoethnography as that allowed for both personal and cultural reflection of my subject and provided a narrative example and qualitative analysis to the field of educational psychology about application of theories of learning (Ellis et al., 2011). Through cultural reflection, I analyzed the vignettes by looking at my own reaction and responses to the culture of education and my own attempt at reform in comparison to theories of learning. Specifically, I looked at the research on motivation, executive functioning, and the purpose and history of education for analysis.

Data collection for this process came from constructing and reconstructing the narrative vignettes through both reflection and layered accounts. In reflection, I utilized

emails, social media posts, calendars, notes from meetings, text messages, and founding documents to recall events and conversations as accurately as possible. These documents were hand-coded to identify themes. The themes I ended up using were "selling the idea," "agency," "incongruence," and "roots." Coded notes were compiled in an electronic document and organized based on events and themes. Some vignettes were recorded as an "emergent experience" to create a layered account of an event close to the time of its occurrence (Ronai, 1992, p. 123). While I still attempted to utilize notes, quotes, and hand- in these moments, they were often spontaneous moments I captured as close as possible to the experience. I used a member check with Michael and Danica by having them read through each vignette to ensure accurate recall and made adjustments when appropriate. In the event their accounts were different from my own, I utilized an outside member check to determine if it was difference in recall or interpretation of the event. When it was a difference in interpretation, I stuck with my own account since this research was a study of my experiences.

Summary of Findings

In this summary of findings, I explored each research question through a discussion, reflection, theme, and analysis of my findings in the context of the literature. Because of time and space, I was unable to provide an analysis of every vignette but chose elements of particular vignettes that fit best to answer the research question.

      Q1   What can I learn from looking out into a culture and then critically looking inward into my own responses and actions?

The first research question served two purposes. The first was meant to address both the methodology and literature review components of my research. My literature review was meant for looking out into culture while the autoethnography was about critically looking inward to see how I responded and acted in response to the literature. The second goal was that the research and the narrative were about looking out into the culture of the school while the analysis and findings were about making the critical look inward to my own responses and actions to see what I learned from the experience. Through my analysis and connections to the themes, experiences, and literature, I synthesized an answer to the first research question.

Looking Out Into the Culture of
Education and My Responses
and Actions

When I looked out to the literature about how students were motivated to learn, the needs of the modern education system, and the history of reform, the theme of agency emerged. While I addressed the agentic perspective within my literature review on motivation, this theme of agency that emerged stemmed from a broader definition of agency as the ability to influence one's life (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) such that "agency leads to actions that are intentionally pursued to exert influence on one's life" (Kristiansen, 2014). For example, as I looked at the needs of the modern educational system, agency was one of the key pieces that was missing. Educational philanthropist, Ted Dintersmith (2015), argued that what modern students needed to be successful were "innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, complex problem-solving, productive collaboration, sound decision-making, passion, and grit" (n.p.). Each one of these qualities required a sense of agency and would be difficult to develop in a highly

controlled environment where students were not the ones in control. Innovation came from the freedom and space to create, passion developed from being exposed to new opportunities to become passionate about, and even productive collaboration came from seeing oneself as being able to contribute to a group

My response to this was very self-analytic. As someone who entered into education with an idealistic vision, I learned in writing the narrative above that the system had crushed my sense of agency. As I mentioned in Chapter I, I wanted to be a change agent; however, what actually ended up happening was I "fell in line" and began to teach in the same ways I had been taught or in the ways I was told to teach. In retrospect, it was incredibly clear to me that education as a system did not inherently value agency in its teachers and students but in those early moments, I believed I was making choices for myself. A pivotal moment for me was the one I described in the Preface. When I began to work with a mentor who provided me with opportunities to become innovative, passionate, and a productive member of a collaborative team, I began to understand the value of agency as a motivator to learning and creating. It was this that set me into motion of starting a school.

In looking out into the culture of the history of education, Dewey (1938/1997) identified that the structures within the system of education that took power away from the students were historically situated to fulfill a labor force need that no longer existed, even in 1938. These structures called for uniformity and obedience, which ultimately flew in the face of agency. My response and action to this came first in my research about school learning. I also looked to see how people learned and what was needed in the future workforce. In the work I read from Bandura (2006) on agency, Pekrun and

Linnenbrink-Garcia's (2012) work on engagement, Zhao (2010) and Robinson and

Aronica's (2015) work on the needs of the future workforce, and Singer and Singer's

(1990) work on the use of play in learning, it was clear that obedience and uniformity

were at odds with the research on learning. Yet obedience and uniformity still seemed to

be a major component of the education model. For instance, the definition I provided

above of "classroom management" said that teachers must keep "students organized,

orderly, focused, attentive, on task, and academically productive" (Glossary of

Education Reform, 2014, p. 1), which was essentially obedience and uniformity, the

same things Dewey was advocating to change even 80 years ago in 1938.

When Chaz broke his lunch box and his mother felt we were to blame was an

example of how culture expects teachers to manage students. There was no expectation

that Chaz was able to manage himself. Teachers must keep "students orderly [and]

focused" and we failed to keep Chaz orderly. However, as I mentioned in the literature

review, Bandura (2006) said agency is comprised of the following: intentionality,

forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. If Chaz never had an opportunity

at school to use these elements of agency, it was likely he would never feel like he had

agency at school. The cultural expectation was the teacher managed the students while

an agentic perspective would ask students to manage themselves.

For me, my newly discovered agency manifested in starting a school. However,

this action required a lot of steps. Because most of the schools that valued obedience

and order tended to be the norm, we had to travel to get another perspective. The trip to

San Francisco was all about seeing a school in action that focused on the work I was

reading on the future of the workforce and the research on learning. Our time spent

watching the students engage in their own learning with the guidance of but not direction from teachers was pivotal to my own growth. Additionally, the act of writing about this in the vignettes was actually a good reminder of many things. For instance, I remembered being so inspired by the school and wanting our school to look similarly right away. However, I now get the time it takes to establish a culture like that.

By the time we went to Brightworks, they had been open for five and half years. Even seeing the difference between year one and two at our school leaves me to only imagine what year five will look like. And, while what I saw at Brightworks was pure magic, I did not remember until I began writing that the founder said year one was incredibly hard for them and year two was even harder. While I was writing about Brightworks when we were nearly at our worst, I observed them when they were at the best they had been yet.

Another piece of looking out into culture was how the American system of education treats its educators; this was also framed within the theme of agency. Early in my Preface, I talked about "teacher proof" lessons and from the box curricula. Dr. Richard Ingersoll (cited in Phillips, 2015) from the University of Pennsylvania highlighted this issue in his research on teacher retention and teacher shortages. In an interview with National Public Radio, Ingersoll stated the research showed that 48% of teachers left the profession due to dissatisfaction that came from "the issue of voice, and having say, and being able to have input into the key decisions in the building that affect a teacher's job. This was something that is a hallmark of professions" (Phillips, 2015, para. 8). He argued that there is a lack of voice and Control in teaching or, ultimately, a lack of agency. Teachers who felt powerless were less likely to stay.

When I thought about hiring, I thought about the famous quote from Steve Jobs (2011), "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do. We hire smart people so they can tell us what to do" (n.p.). As I wrote about the hiring process and the reflection that came with the people we chose and the people we did not, I could not help but think that we nailed it in bucking against the cultural norm in education. We intentionally hired people who had different ideas than us and specifically ones who were willing to share those. We hired people who could model empowerment for their students and who were comfortable being in charge of their own work. We hired for agency. People who did not feel a sense of agency really stood out as well.

They were the ones who could not fathom the space, the ones who did not. The most recent graduates we interviewed at the teacher fair clearly stood out as not having agency. Frequently, they looked overwhelmed and were always the most surprised when we said we were not going to have a principal.

Yet, I learned that hiring and practice were two different things. By the end of the year, receiving the text that said the leaders needed to act more like leaders, I was confused. Up to that moment, if I was being honest, I could feel this need for guidance from our staff. Some things felt too ambiguous for them; the entire staff often looked to us for the answers for all the questions despite having the control to make decisions.

Additionally, I found myself getting frustrated when the staff responded to test scores by resorting to traditional teaching methods, although their response was actually representative of their agency. In my reflections, I learned there was a balance between providing leadership and creating an environment where people felt they had agency.

What I had yet to learn was where that balance was and how to lead in a way that offered both, although I continued to practice, listen, and learn. Looking out into culture and then reflecting back also led me to think about the process I went through to market the school. While education is compulsory, the move toward school-of-choice has created a unique need for schools to develop solid marketing skills (Balsa, 2018). While I grew up in a culture where everyone went to his or her neighborhood school, my experience teaching in a charter was solid enough experience to know that marketing mattered. However, this was neither my background nor my strength. As an individual, I was not highly active on social media; until recently, I had never blogged; I do not build websites; and I was not particularly good at speaking to strangers. However, I suddenly was thrust into a world that valued all of those skills, which seemed so disconnected from what I learned in my education training to be an educator. I was simultaneously grateful for the culture shift that allowed for schools-of- choice like mine and overwhelmed by what level of new work that required; I truly understood in this moment the value of expertise and I did not have it. I also did not suddenly want to become one of those people who I saw on Twitter who was suddenly so enmeshed in pitching my plan that I forgot about the plan itself. For example, blogger and educator Bill Fitzgerald (2019) called out these types of educators on Twitter when he wrote, "In edu conversations (and especially in edu social media spaces), we have a glut of people who are more skilled at marketing and branding than long term, human- centered planning" (n.p.). However, I realized there was no choice but to find a balance.

Thematically, this experience fit into the category of "selling the idea." We had a plethora of experiences that came with "selling the idea" that involved me needing to

step outside of my own comfort zone. Additionally, the research I had done on charter schools led me to understand that charters disproportionately served students who were "better-off" (Elgart & Wheelan, 2018) and much of my process of "selling the idea" was aimed at attracting a diverse population of students. As I reflected back on "selling the idea," there were so many vignettes and experiences to explore. Getting the website up and running, running the mini-camps, conducting community meetings, managing social media, pitching the idea to the school board, and attending community events were just a few. There were also others that were not written in the narrative but were also pivotal such as the days spent knocking on doors in the community around the school to try to bring in families from the low-income housing community. While I did not write a vignette about it, it was, to this day, one of my most terrifying social experiences since knocking on the doors of strangers was so uncomfortable.

The main thing I learned from selling the idea was there was so much more that went into starting a school that was not just planning the curriculum and instruction. Early in our startup, when we had planned to open as a charter school, I met with someone from a management organization; this was very much against my beliefs because they are privately run but I was feeling desperate. While I hated the idea of being a privately-run charter, there did now seem to be another way to get a new school up and running in my community. The management organization's role would have been to do much of the work for us with advertising, marketing, real estate, and creation of materials. The cost for this service would have come from the per pupil revenue and was around 17%. This amount would have cut heavily into our budget. The daunting workload, though, made it feel worth it to have fewer resources later for more help in

the moment. I imagine many people starting schools went through this since about 41% of charters are run by a private management organization (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). I had strong philosophical beliefs against using public dollars for private interests, but I was blinded by the level of work needed to be done and my desire to get the school open, which made me vulnerable. In the end, we were able to join the school district, which ended up being a much better solution.

Through writing about the workload that came with selling the idea, I noticed why I was vulnerable to partnering with an educational management organization. As I wrote the stories about everything we had to do, I could feel remnants of the stress I felt at the time. We were so ambitious, yet so overwhelmed. Also, despite having diverse backgrounds of work experience prior to teaching, none of us had the time to learn some of the skills necessary to be successful in our endeavor. For instance, with no background in real estate contracts, we likely would have not noticed that the terms of the contract for the basement space kept changing. We desperately needed a partner and luckily that ended up being the school district and not an educational management organization.

Looking Out Into the Culture of Our School and the District and My Responses and Actions

As I looked out into the culture of our school and district and how I responded to that, I frequently found myself trying to "sell the idea." This was often fraught with me overselling the idea as well. I learned a great deal about myself through this experience. One of the better qualities I learned about came from selling the idea to the superintendent. The night I worked to put together the website and the confidence I

had while sitting in that office were two moments I remind myself of frequently when I am either trying to tackle a difficult task or when I have to present to someone whom I would typically be intimidated. The less favorable quality came from feeling like I needed to convince everyone. While in the vignette "To 183," I said we knew "we didn't need everyone to want to come to our school," I am not sure I truly believed that. In reflecting back on those moments, I clearly remembered times in "selling the idea" where I said things to people because it was what I thought they wanted to hear but it was not necessarily the truth.

Also, in my vignette about losing Chaz, I mentioned that I felt like I was sugar-coating everything and walking on eggshells whenever I talked to his mother. At that time, I was obviously not secure enough in what we were doing and I was actually trying to convince her with my "sugar-coating" instead of just letting her go. However, for that family, the issue was not about us. The school was not a good fit for the family and I just was not ready to come to terms with that. It was hard not to take it personally whenever we lost a student and it was even harder not to want to convince them that this was a better place for their child in some cases.

We lost a handful of families up through winter break; for many of them, my instinct was to beg them to stay. I never did but I must admit I was not nearly as gracious in private. I wanted to be that person I wrote about in my reflection, the one who said that I did not feel like we needed everyone to want to come to our school but I was not that person in reality. I wanted them all to want to be there and I wanted them to think it was as cool of a place as I did. I got excited when our list grew well beyond capacity. I shared posts and marketed in a way that had a broad appeal, even to people

who might have been perfectly happy with their child's current school. I did finally get to that place by the end of last year because I did not need to convince anyone it was a great place. Every family who ended last year with us started with us this year. I did not even feel compelled to advertise for enrollment for the second year because we already had a very long waiting list. I was able to move beyond needing that validation and over the summer before this current year, I was able to spend quite a bit of time reflecting.

Selling the idea to the school district was a different story. While I still sought their approval, it was in a different way than the approval I wanted from parents with children. With the school district, I wanted them to believe in us enough to want this to be a part of the district but also to not be overly interested and super involved in our process. While I liked when they showed up to our museum night, I was not going out of my way to involve them into the daily workings of the school. I think I underestimated the importance of this. Even though it seemed like they had followed me when I presented that modern education was not preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow (Zhao, 2012) and that I wanted to create a school that did, they had not followed me. They wanted and still want a school that prepares students for tests and if they happen to develop more agency, entrepreneurship, and innovation as a side-effect, then that would be good too.

For instance, when we went before the board about our turnaround status rating, the only thing they wanted us to report was our test scores; when the assistant superintendent presented our data to the board, it was really clear to us that she did not really understand our school or what learning looked like on a daily basis. There were so many moments during the first year that I walked around the school and was

speechless by what the kids were learning or doing; however, we were not sharing this with the very group of people that ultimately determined our fate. Through looking out at the culture of the school and then reflecting inward, I realized I was hesitant to bring people from the school district in because of my own insecurity about what learning was and how we were measuring it. I believed students were learning. I saw it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears but the measures for what students were learning and how to quantify it were not clearly established. While we needed people to observe what was happening so they could tell our story, we also needed a better grasp of what was happening.

As a group, we had reflected on how we could do a better job of measuring learning as we began to reflect on how to improve things into year two. But it was not until I wrote about the school board meeting in the reflection about the assistant superintendent poorly sharing about our school that I really grasped how important having clear measures would be for year two. It was not just about validating or demonstrating that students were learning. It could literally be what saved us if students continued to not perform well on standardized tests. I also realized that I needed to let my insecurities go and invite people in to see what we were doing. While people tended to tour our building from outside the school district frequently, I could count on one hand how often people from within the school district had been in our building during the school day. For us, it was a defense mechanism not to invite them to the school but like most defense mechanisms, this served us well at one point but was now a bit damaging.

When looking out into the culture of our school and district and reflecting, I see that we still have a lot more work to do. I need to make sure we collect clear data that paints a picture of what our student are learning. Inviting people from our district to see the learning has to be an imperative. Finally, it is important that I am always clear about what our school is and what learning looks like for us.

Q2   In what ways did I reconcile the conflict that exists between the standardization movement and what research says about learning, motivation, and the purpose of education?

A common theme that emerged in the data was "incongruence." I identified these moments as incongruent because these were the times when there was some type of misalignment. There were many instances in the process when I experienced or even displayed incongruence--where my feelings and thoughts were not aligned with my actions; moments when my actions and responses were not aligned with someone else's beliefs; and moments where I learned that the learning needs of children were frequently incongruent with the structure of the modern education system. In all of these occasions, the incongruence could be traced back to the standardization movement, which was only used to measure traditional expectations in education. I frequently found myself trying to figure out who I was and in what did I believe.

Reconciling the Conflict Between
the Standardization Movement
and What Research Says About
Learning and Motivation

Research is really messy when it comes to how people learn. In order to start the school, I pored through the research on learning and I struggled to find anything that agreed on what works best. For instance, a great deal out there showed that a project-based, hands-on experience for kids that focused on proficiency instead of arbitrary

grade levels was effective in motivating students to learn how to learn and helping them to gain conceptual understanding and critical thinking (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Boaler, 1999; Darling-Hammond et al., 2008; Thomas, 2000). Even more, research showed these methods helped students develop skills needed to be successful beyond school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008).

However, plenty of research also showed that what we do as a school is to merely repeat everything that has been tried and failed during different periods of education reform. Open space learning was a fad that came and mostly went by the early 1980s (Drummond, 2017). Flexible grade levels have made appearances on and off starting back at the one room school house and moving into modern day. Project-based learning has been promising but not proven (Condliffe, 2017); small class sizes and student- directed learning have been tried as well, all without enough impact to stick.

Furthermore, despite the research I found that said a project-based, hands-on experience was the future of learning, an abundance of research also showed these were ineffective or at least minimally effective as well; however, the effectiveness was generally measured in relationship to standardized tests. When looking at the impact on learning as measured by recall, depth of understanding, and application, project-based learning, flexible grade levels, and small class sizes have shown promise. For this reason, those elements were included in the literature review and have been the foundation for our school.

I believed that merely preparing kids for a test limited their creativity and innovation; our school needed to follow research that enhanced creativity and

innovation. Jiang Xueqin (2010), principal of Peking University High School in Shanghai, said the testing culture was to blame for China's overall lack of innovation. He argued that "using tests to structure schooling is a mistake. Students lose their innate inquisitiveness and imagination and become insecure and amoral in the pursuit of high scores" (p. 1).

We agreed with this philosophy and tried to avoid the testing culture. Despite attempts to avoid the testing culture, as a school we are steeped in it. The incongruence that existed because of testing was the greatest I experienced. In Toast 15: The Gut Punch, I wrote about the impact test scores had on our staff. While I tried to protect our staff from reacting to test scores, it was inevitable that they would react because that is how schools in our nation are measured. Our teachers did and still do continue to go against their own values and the mission of the school because they know the test scores will be public and I feel them constantly fighting the pull to conform. For instance, recently we suggested a couple classes spend a day at the park and one of the collaborators was concerned about being able to get her math manipulatives to and from the park. A myriad of research on learning would support a day at the park but there was nothing in the test that would support that day unless of course you brought your math manipulatives and did school like usual--just in the park.

In Toast 16, the level in which we were steeped in testing culture became the most apparent. While it was there when we were selling our model to the board in the beginning, it was there when people asked how kids would perform on the test going to a school like ours; being asked if we would consider doing test preparation left me

stunned. Additionally, something I did not include in Toast 16 was at that board

meeting, the superintendent told us,

> You know we have a school on the clock, and this will be the fifth year. I don't
> imagine the board will give you that long. I have no doubts your scores will go
> up, but I also imagine the board will take over if you are still on the clock in
> three years.

With this in the back of my mind, I had to make many decisions.

Because of the value of the test, I found my current values and expectations

in learning and the values and expectations in learning of the education system were

incongruent. There was a clear disconnect between what I had seen as learning,

what society expected students to be able to achieve when they graduated, and how

learning was measured. When the United States needs innovators and problem

solvers, testing cannot be narrowed to simply reading and mathematics progress.

This disconnect impacted me frequently. When we are asked whether or not we

would do test preparation, or there are comments about closing down our school

after just one year, or when we have to have weekly meetings with the assistant

superintendent, I am left feeling like changing schools in ways that are not linked to

improving test performance is nearly impossible.

Reconciling the Conflict Between
Standardization and the Purpose
of Education

As I wrote in the introduction, early in my career my teaching was often

incongruent with my own philosophies in education. I had the training in the

philosophers of change, and I believed wholeheartedly in their visions, but the

expectations of working in a traditional school made it really difficult to act in

accordance with those beliefs. When I was an instructional coach, I was expected to

impact student achievement, yet the only measure that existed for this was the test. Obviously, I coached teachers to use the most effective, research-based methods for achieving higher test scores. These two experiences were pivotal in my career because this incongruity set me on the path to starting a school.

During my graduate studies, I had learned about the issues with attitude-behavior consistency in which "people's verbal responses at time 1 are often unrelated to their observed behavior at time 2" (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 179). This was founded on research in psychology, which posited that people's words, even when in earnest, were often different from their actions in a given situation (Haddock & Maio, 2007). My frustration working as a coach for the school district stemmed from this issue. My words and actions at work had not been consistent with my beliefs about the purpose of education and in order to grow, I needed to find a way to align the two--the school became my outlet for this.

The majority of this problem stemmed from the fact that what I was taught and what I was doing were simply at odds with each other. What I had been taught was education was about more than school itself. In school, I had developed philosophies around the purpose of education and believed in people like Dewey (1938/1997) who said that education is a social institution and an experience meant to prepare students for social life in society (Dewey, 1938/1997). I followed Freire (1992) who argued that the purpose of education is curiosity because "there is no happiness without curiosity" (p. 2). However, that was not the world I entered into. I entered into a world where there was a conflict between what I learned to be the purpose of education and what I experienced as a result of the standards movement. In the actual practice of education,

test scores mattered most, achievement was central to all conversations, and genuine care for students was pared down to how well they were prepared to succeed on the test. My values and belief in the purpose of education no longer were the driving force for my actions but rather how well my students would do on the test became central to all of my decisions, planning, and interactions with my students.

I attempted to reconcile my own internal conflict and incongruence by using autoethnography as a reflection of these moments where my actions did not align with my beliefs. As I conveyed with the vignettes, with our school, we tried to focus on the experience, on curiosity, and on developing social beings who were able to navigate their world; however, the desire to focus on test scores was always there when that was the sole accountability measure for the school. For instance, in the vignette about the district presenting our data, the presentation was to show how we were doing as a school but the only measure used was testing. No measures took into account my daughter giving a speech in front of the whole school.

No measures accounted for Bruno's letter. While Bruno was showing incredible growth in his own executive functioning and social-behavioral engagement, a keystone to learning and future success, no test measured this. There also seemed to be little room for kids like Bruno in traditional schools. No measures showed my own child was suddenly comfortable in front of a crowd or that she felt confidence and agency--two very important characteristics for leaders. Her growth was difficult to measure on a math or reading test.

At the heart of things, it always felt like testing was the main priority and, sometimes, this was blatantly the message. For instance, our school assessment

coordinator recently went to a meeting where he recorded in his notes that the assistant superintendent said, "From January to the end of April is testing season, and this is the most important work we do. From here until the end of April, testing must be your number one priority!" For three and a half months of our school year, testing was supposed to be our "number one priority." I recently met with a board member and the first question the member asked was "How are your test scores looking?" Testing was not supposed to be the purpose of education but it has been difficult for our school and leadership team to not see it as such when it is at the forefront of so many conversations.

To prove just how much this weighed on my head as a school leader, in writing the paragraph above, I wrote the word "testing" and "priority" and I was suddenly distracted. I found myself pulling up our most recent math assessment and quickly analyzing the scores to see if I saw growth. I looked at my own kids' scores and was delighted to see that one of my daughters had made significant growth. On a daily basis, I struggle with my own incongruence. There is frequently a disconnect between what I truly believe and my actions. For instance, I do not believe my child's scores on the math assessment tell any type of story of what she is truly learning; yet I still am fighting that piece of me that thinks test scores somehow equal learning and success and that is so deeply ingrained in me. Despite my own philosophy about the purpose of education, it is hard, even in the middle of all of this, to see anything but performance on tests as the end goal. It is in only in writing this or talking about it that I realize how ridiculous that is.

The conflict between the purpose of education and standardization was also apparent as I reflected on the vignette of losing Chaz. My interactions with his mother really highlighted the misalignment between the school's mission and values and what parents often valued in education. Incongruence such as this was eye opening to me as I began to realize that it was not just the state that valued test scores as the indicator of learning. I had lived under the belief that most parents who had chosen our school were looking for a different model of education but I learned that the pull to what was familiar was too great for some.

Chaz's mother's concerns were grounded in a traditional belief about what education looked like. Without worksheets coming home and percentage grades on papers, she felt like she had no idea how Chaz was doing in school. It was a bit of a leap to blame this wholly on the standardization movement in education but I definitely believe standardization played a role. Chaz's mother's comments about our reading tests and curriculum were evidence of this. She wanted clear cut data on how he was doing in comparison to other students as this was the way to measure learning for her. The fact that our reading program was not as systematic as those in the district and did not frequently test kids to "see how they were doing" was one of the main reasons she pulled Chaz from the school.

We lost a few families right before winter break our first year and they all had a similar reason. Their concerns were around things like we did not assign enough homework, their kids were not going to be prepared for high school or college with our design, and we did not provide enough testing evidence to show how much they were growing. These concerns were in line with the same things we heard out in the

community when we talked to people about our school. In fact, two of the most common questions we were asked when talking to people in the community about our school were "How do you think your students will do on the test?" and "How will they be able to transition to high school?" These two questions were quite telling about the value of school since they highlighted the belief that school was in place for the sake of school.

Instead of asking how the school would prepare students to be better citizens, take ownership for their decisions, or learn how to learn, people frequently asked how it would prepare students for testing or future school. I had several people ask me why there were not more schools like ours and this is why; until the time comes when people are more concerned with how school prepares children for life and not just more school, schools cannot change.

Q3   What can I learn from the dilemmas that are created from my own and other's historical experiences with education?

A few years back, I was talking to a person about starting the school and I was explaining how I felt like I was constantly at war with myself about how to change. I have spent over two decades now in more traditional models of education and at the time of this conversation, I had never seen a school that was anything other than traditional despite being in different schools weekly for my job of observing student teachers. The most unique thing I had seen up to this point was blended learning where the students had traditional content delivered via computers and did practice problems in a platform that was gamified. This did not feel like innovation to me.

The person I was speaking to asked me, "Have you ever pulled a tree out of the ground?" I laughed and said, "No! That's ridiculous." She said, "Do you have

aspen trees in your yard at all?" Like everyone else in Northern Colorado, of course I

did. When I explained that I did she asked if I had ever had to pull the baby aspen

sprouts out of the ground. Again, like everyone else in Colorado, of course I had.

Then she said, "Have you ever pulled a large aspen out of the ground?" I finally got

where she was going. We talked about roots and I realized that changing my views on

education was the equivalent of pulling an aspen out of the ground with a 20-year

root system. I also realized that others had their own root systems and changing their

ideas was going to be just as hard. In the coding of my notes, I used "roots" to

identify this theme and the moments and interactions where I or someone else was

responding for a historical perspective of education.

Learning from the Dilemmas from
my Own Historical Experiences
with Education

I have had several moments over the past two years where I found myself

returning to my roots of traditional education. I found myself checking student data

on the very tests I said I did not value way more often than I was comfortable with. I

found myself explaining how students were doing on tests way more often than I was

comfortable with. I found myself worrying about my own children's growth based on

their data. In the board presentation from Toast 5: The Long Haul, I even asked,

"How do we prepare students for an ever-accelerating world while also meeting *high*

levels of rigorous educational demands?" High levels of rigorous educational

demands have a connotation and that connotation has its own roots in the testing

movement. I have frequently found myself drifting back to what I was comfortable

with and even seeing our collaborators in a light that was filtered through a historical view of education.

However, what led me to want to be a part of the change was also because of my historical experience with education or, at least, my child's. My history as a teacher was mostly me spending a lot of time very conflicted. During my undergraduate and master's degrees, I had done a significant amount of reading on education and I was pretty aware that the system did not work for so many kids. Yet, simultaneously, I believed in what I was doing in the classroom and thought that if kids were not succeeding, it was because they were choosing not to and not because I was part of the very system, I railed against in online discussion forums and night classes.

I struggled with my own hypocrisy and sometimes was aware and sometimes was not. One of my current friends was a former student of mine nearly 15 years ago while I was early in my career. She often bragged about earning a 37% in my class and was very frank that my "class was stupid, and I made them do things they would never have to do in real life!" While it stung, she was not wrong. Her 37% in my English class told no story at all as she was quite successful and was a great communicator today; she is currently finishing her master's degree in theology.

My eyes were opened, though, when I had my own child, and even more opened when I had a second child. Once Morgan entered school, it was clear the system was not for everyone because it was not for my own child. I had this wonderfully creative six- year old who, by the first grade, was crying about having to read books, crying about having to go to school, and faking illnesses starting in

kindergarten to get out of going to school. She had loved preschool and was so excited to go to school but by the age of six, she dreaded school days. This experience changed me because my husband and I are both teachers and suddenly I had a child who did not enjoy school.

My experience with my children was solidified once I delved into the research. As I learned that students needed to have agency over their learning to feel connected to it, I saw where the gaps were in my teaching and in the experience of my children (Bandura, 2006). As I read about self-efficacy and executive functioning (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Welsh & Schmitt-Wilson, 2013), I became acutely aware that the traditional and historical method of education no longer served its purpose in modern reform. For instance, students trained in the factory model were not trained to regulate themselves as they were required to work in an industry where someone else regulated them. Finally, when I learned about how emotions were tied to success in education (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012), it became clear to me why the current system was failing so many students. Because education serves more students than ever before, we are also working to help kids learn who have more trauma. For instance, in 1920, 64.3% of school-aged children attended school and by the 1991 that number was over 92% and climbing (Snyder, 1993). While education is and should be a right for everyone, educating all children comes with some hurdles. For example, educating children from poverty or children who have experienced trauma also means there needs to be a more focused effort in schools to meet their emotional needs first. However, the traditional model of education has less of a focus on meeting emotional needs because it was less relevant

90 years ago. My own historical experience was rife with holes that needed to be filled with research.

**Learning from the Dilemmas of
Others' Historical Experiences
with Education**

Through the process of starting the school, I learned a great deal about how people's historical experience with education impacted them. Dr. Peter Gray (2008), psychologist and author of *Free to Learn,* argued that school has hardly changed in the United States because people are afraid to look different and because education has created its own system where it has defined success. Grades and test scores are still the ticket to more education and more education is frequently the ticket to more income. However, Gray said this system is problematic because grades and tests do not always represent a person's knowledge, skills, ability to learn, but still tend to be the path to success. Because of this, education is only able to make incremental changes, not large-scale changes.

When I meet people who ask about the school, this is commonly reflected in their responses. For instance, Chaz's mother's response was due to her "roots" in education. She believed success in school could easily be seen with worksheets and test scores. These were the measures of success she longed for because they were likely linked to her own historical experience with education. The teacher who asked us if we were going to teach kids their letters and finger-spelled the letter "A" was also speaking from her own historical experience with education. We also had instances where members of the district leadership team made comments like "We just want to make sure you are not experimenting on children." Comments such as these had the

subtext that there is a right way to do education, one that has been tested, anything new is an experiment, and experiments are bad. The architect who could not even envision how the space we chose could be a school was also responding from her historical roots in education. Because our building did not look like what she imagined as a school, with separate classrooms and quiet learning spaces, she had no mental model of how the space could be a modern- day school.

However, I also learned there were many other people who no longer had roots in the traditional school system. Either they found it had not worked for them and had not met their needs or they did not feel like it was working for their children. For instance, 16% of the students who came to our school last year had previously been homeschooled. While three of them had never attended another school before ours, the remaining 14 had attended another school and their parents decided to homeschool them until our school opened. Their dilemma was their experience with the traditional system was not successful and they did not feel there was a place for their child in the current school system.

The experience parents had previously had was most apparent to me the morning after the article from the newspaper about our school being on turnaround status. What the parents wrote about us on our school's Facebook page was moving and really helped highlight how they saw what we were doing as valuable. The comment that really stood out as showing a need to move from the traditional system was when the one mother wrote, "I hope the plan is to stick with the model that [the school] was created on and continue to not be part of the traditional American schooling norms that have gotten us where we are today." While the traditional model

felt comfortable and necessary for some parents, it had been counterproductive for others.

I learned a great deal from both the people who did not want to see education change because of their own historical experience and I learned from the people who did want education to change because of their historical experience. From the first group, I learned that people who wanted to change education had an uphill battle because they were trying to pull up a tree that was hundreds of years old. I also learned that it might feel unnecessary to convince everyone that our model is just as valid as any other model but we still have a responsibility to prove that somehow. From the group that wanted change in education because of their own historical experience, I learned there was a longing for something new for some people, I learned the old system did not work for everyone, and I learned plenty of people did not see school as connected to lifelong learning and skills.

Conclusion

As I worked on starting the school and running it the first year, I learned there was a great need for change in education. Homeschooling rates in our nation are high and more and more parents are looking for something different. Our waiting list is long despite fears that there would be no desire for this type of education. We built it and they came; and they keep coming. However, through all of this, I learned why change in education is hard. Reading back through my writing, I felt like the system of education was a bit like the bank monster in *Grapes of Wrath*--Steinbeck (1939) wrote, "The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it" (p. 24). This quote felt familiar to me. School are

beholden to their districts, who are beholden to the state, who reports to the nation. The nation is compared to other nations using a similar test and it no longer feels like humans are in control of the system.

One of the biggest things I wrestled with was all of the conflicting information and conflicting experiences. With all of these differing ideas, I learned from my reflection that there was no way for me to reconcile this conflict between the ideas because it was all so dichotomous. While engaging in the process of designing a school based on research in learning and motivation, I learned there was no one thing that was research in learning and motivation. On one end of the spectrum was John Hattie and on the other end was John Dewey. When looking at what works for learning and motivation, it was really difficult to sort through all of the noise of competing research regarding how students learned and how best to educate. The way I found to sort through the noise was by first establishing the criteria for the purpose of education and then filtering my research through that lens. The experiences and the learning I witnessed have been immense but it will likely be a substantial amount of time before I find out if it is considered valuable.

Autoethnography has allowed me to reflect on what the process was of opening and running a school in the first year. Had I done a more quantitative study, I might have collected focused data that would allow me to determine the effectiveness of our educational model in a way that was valued more in the system of education and more specifically by the local school district. However, what I learned through my coursework in educational psychology, through my research in starting the school, and in my research for this dissertation was a significant body of quantitative

data already proved that what we had implemented as an educational model was an effective way to learn. We will likely need several years to be at our best and to really see the impact of what we have implemented. It has already been two years of trial and error and we have grown so much from that but I have also grown through this writing. If I want to know what I need to improve about our system, I will always start from narrative reflection before I collect more quantitative data and this has been, for me, a great way to look at our school.

Implications

The implications in this study were grounded in the narrative. This story is one of many stories and I am just one of many people who have opened schools. These narratives exist; while many of them are not public, they are all a piece of the fabric of our modern education system and they all likely tell a different story. The conclusions that might be drawn from the research and the narrative were likely grounded in the narrative the system of education is simultaneously experiencing. It appears we are in a time of rapid educational change that is also confined to a standards-based system. In that experience, I hope fellow reformers will learn that while changing education is hard, it is worth it to try. Also, in changing education, one has to play many roles, pull up deeply rooted trees, and fight against a system whose only measure is limited to reading and math scores on a test.

Recommendations for Future Research

So many possibilities exist for future research within the school. Since this was a qualitative study, some of the most potential lies in quantitative research and especially survey data. For instance, this year we tried co-teaching in our school since

we saw the potential to lean more heavily on each teacher's individual strengths. Co-teaching felt like it was a move away from a more personalized relationship-based model that we had last year. Quantitative data on this experience from the students' points-of-view would be beneficial to make future decisions. This is just one example of many where we could collect more quantitative data.

Beyond the school walls, I think there is a need for more in-depth research on the impact standardized testing has had on the attempt to innovate education. My personal experience is innovation is hard when the test has become so narrowed; however, I do not have any data to quantify that experience. I also think there is more room for research on the impact the testing movement has had on innovation within our country. For instance, data show that as test scores on the PISA exam have dropped in China, the number of patents has increased (Zhao, 2017). While the correlation here may not be the cause, it could certainly warrant future research.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

RAW DATA

Data Source	Total Quantity	Quantity Used	Summary of Content
Emails	840 emails	53	- Emails about Chaz, Bruno, and George
Facebook Messenger	4	1	- Parent messages about enrollment - Exchange between me and James about job position.
Text Messages	2,317		- Planning messages - Student concerns - Family concerns
Google Docs	40 before opening 60 after opening 1000 total pages	23 total documents 137 pages	- Start of school notes, speeches - Planning documents - Notes from meetings with school district -
Journal Notes	32 pages	16 pages	- Journals about Chaz and interactions with his mother. - Vignette about "The Gut Punch" and "An Awkward Cheer" - San Francisco

Pictures	4,200+	1	- Pictures of students at school engaging in learning, playing at the playground, and on museum night. - Picture of letter from Bruno to Devin (Sept. 11, 2018)
Family Facebook Page	42	4	- Comments from parents about their child's success at school.

APPENDIX B

DATA CATEGORIES

Minor Categories	Major Categories	Themes
School Building	District Help	Barriers to success
Contracts		
Construction		
School Design (Physical)		
Money	Things we need	
Advertising		
Community Support		
Press/Advertising	Marketing to community	Selling the Idea
Parent Meetings		
Community Meetings		
Marketing		
Website		
Website	Marketing to future teachers	
Hiring		
Instructional model		
Website	Marketing to school board	
Board meetings		

Instructional model		
Budget		
Flexible thinking	Staff needs	Building Capacity
Hiring		
Assessment		
Staff Development	Staff Growth	
Observation feedback		
Culture building		
Culture building	Environment where students have power	Agency
Learning loops		
Student autonomy		
Staff autonomy		
Modern education	Teacher is in charge	
PBIS		
Classroom management		
Meeting with district weekly	Testing culture	Incongruence
UIP struggles/time		
Time spent on assessment		
Traditional work		

Ted Dintersmith	Research on learning	
John Dewey		
Jo Boaler		
Linda Darling-Hammond		
Yong Zhao		
Staff development	Leadership	Struggles
Seeing ourselves as leaders		
Training		
District leadership	Outside pressures	
CDE		
Test scores		
People in community		
Hawk's mom	Traditional model	Roots
My background		
Parent support	Move away from traditional model	
Parent emails		
My child		

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE NOTES

Example notes showing highlighting process for data analysis. Names, places and identifying descriptors blacked out:

School of Innovation

Notes from planning meetings

March 18, 2016
Names Removed met to continue conversation and plan next
steps Discussed:

- ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ toured the top floor of the Kress Building which has been used as the ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ campus a few years back- 6 large classrooms- very traditional classroom space- approx. 7500 square feet, dance studio is also looking at leasing this space- contacts are ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮ finance manager at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮ - Downtown Developer (▮▮▮▮▮
- Some of next steps are budget and finance, location, governance, marketing, state rules around Innovation Status
  ▮▮▮▮▮▮ will talk ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to learn why they
  decided not to go innovation route
- Next meeting will inc▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ - Thursday, April 7- 4-5 pm

April 7,
2016
Names
Removed
Discussed:

- ▮▮▮▮ shared she had visited with ▮▮▮▮▮▮ about the ▮▮▮ space- he is sending her the floorplan and contractual information if we desire to pursue that space- ▮▮▮ is committed to using this space for educational purposes and is willing to lease to the dance group for a year until we would need the space
- Would like space in proximity to community resources such as library, arts, etc.
- Want a space for both new tech (3-d printers) and old tech (wood shop including electric tools); Brightworks has a full workshop for students with heavy equipment access 1 hour per day for the older students to use under adult supervision after the students have tested out to use the equipment.
- Want a 5-day week for school

- Teacher ratio- would like to be 15:1, possibly include a para to help with the arts and shop, possibly office person/health clerk, custodial might be done by whole school?
- Potential Revenue: Weekend and Summer Camps, as well as pop-up camps starting in August 2016; grants ████████ will █████████ the district grant approval form
- School of Innovation Status- must be filed with state- takes up to 60 days for approval after local BOE approves
- Next Meeting will inc████████████ (marketing and when)- April 21, 4-5 pm

APPENDIX D

VIGNETTES NOT INCLUDED IN ANALYSIS

Start-Up Stories

In February 2015 we met Lori who was the Director of New School Development at the Colorado League of Charter Schools. We were conflicted from the very start. While Michael worked in a charter school, one of our main characteristics of our dream school was "not exclusive" and we recognized that going the charter school route may violate this. However, the school district that would be our authorizer was not very open to new ideas.

The local school district believed that because of the transient nature of the student population, every school needed to be exactly the same. Because of that, every school at the elementary level had a scripted curriculum and all 15 schools were required to be on the same page on the same day at the same time in that curriculum. All teachers had a small whiteboard that hung outside their door where they were to write which lesson they were on in literacy and math daily so that they could be held accountable to this. Needless to say, our school did not seem to fit with this. While Colorado has the option for Innovation schools, which are district schools with waivers like a charter, the leadership in the district's goals were at odds with anything that looked like innovation.

Lori was warm and open and had been through this process herself. She also was very familiar with our school district, which is nearly saturated with charter schools. At

the time of writing this 23% of the 21,000 students in Greeley-Evans were in one of the six charter schools. She believed Greeley was at a tipping point and that there would not be room for another charter, until she saw our model. Lori believed we were different enough to fill a gap, and with our desire to build our school in a downtown neighborhood, with no other schools in walking distance, we had a lot of potential to succeed. We were given a plan that involved six stages of writing a planning grant that would culminate in a nearly complete charter school application. And then we told her our time frame.

Lori laughed when we told her we wanted to open in the fall of 2016. We had planned to go from nothing to a fully functioning school in just 18 months. Lori had been down this road before with another charter that had opened in our town the year before. They too had an 18-month time frame, which is what inspired us since they managed to open in that time, but they also floundered miserably in their first few years, turning over their entire leadership team more than once, being embroiled in controversy in the media, having a larger than average attrition rate, and boasting test scores that were the lowest in the district. In fact, this past year their grace period for a new school startup ended and they are now on academic watch through the state. We still had not really learned the value of being deliberate and were blinded by our ambition and motivated by their success, so we ignored learning from their failures. But more than ambition, in retrospect, I believe we were also blinded by our own desire to get our own children out of the traditional school. Michael and I both had children, and while his son and my youngest daughter were not yet in school and would be heading in to kindergarten in the fall of 2015, my oldest had just struggled through 1ˢᵗ grade.

By the time I had met with Lori, I had already had a conference with my daughter's principal in which she told me that her school, the only district arts and literacy magnet, was probably not a good fit for my child. It wasn't a good fit because I had complained that my child wasn't getting any arts, and I was informed by the principal that literacy was really their core, while arts was an addition, an addition that kids in grade one didn't really get to experience. I had a 7-year-old who could play flute by ear and started writing lyrics to songs when she was 4, but the arts magnet was not a good fit. She was already struggling in the classroom, and the only school that was not a charter that should have been different in the district, was exactly like all the other schools. Same page, same day curriculum and no arts.

Her classroom teacher had also suggested that I homeschool my daughter during the next year because she was struggling too much in school. Her evidence: my 7-year old was unable to write five 1 ½ page papers in a four-week time frame and she was reading 10 fewer words per minute than she should be at the end of first grade. My child who had loved books and writing would now cry when asked to read or write and was beginning to fake headaches to come home from school. Additionally, despite what research says about homework in early elementary (Cooper, 2016), homework was already the worst part of our night, sometimes taking over an hour. I was highly motivated to move fast, and it was personal. I learned this is not a good reason to move fast; in fact, it is probably the worst reason to move fast.

The planning grant process proved easy to write since the paper I wrote for the school design project answered most of the grant questions, and we were meeting weekly and making our deadlines. We moved fairly quickly until I attended the League of

Charter Schools Conference in February of 2015 and Michael the League Boot Camp in

April; we became paralyzed by all that needed to be done. We wrote our first Stage one

planning grant on February 12th, 2015, but it took us until January of 2016 (almost a full

year later) to turn it back in. Our 18-month time frame had been blown out of the water.

This paralysis that occurred ended up being the best thing that could have happened to us;

we just didn't know it yet.

With the expectation of receiving that grant, though, we still spent the money. In

fact, we spent our full $2,500, that in the end, we never recovered. We booked venues

and bought snacks for our first two community events to share information about our

school with interested families, paid someone to design a logo for the school, paid

someone to build a website (that never actually worked), created a Facebook page and

began advertising, designed and printed fliers, and we even flew to San Francisco to visit

some of our inspiration spots like Brightworks Academy and the Exploratorium.

The Charter Schools Conference and Boot camp, or Paralysis

During the process Michael and I attended two separate events put on by the

Colorado League of Charter Schools. One was a conference and the other a boot camp.

The conference was for new and existing schools. At the conference center there were

booths set up to see all of the newest in flexible seating, curriculum materials, and meet

contractors. There were speakers talking about the latest in charter school law and their

process of starting schools. There was also an opportunity to network with other founders

and learn from their process. At the time, it felt like the best place to be. I collected

materials on ordering furniture and contact information from contractors; I brought home

the *newest Colorado Charter School Law* book; I made connections with people in

schools from Denver that we admired. In April, Michael attended a boot camp where he

went to an 8-hour workshop on school finance. It was the same thing. Michael came

home with his head filled to the brim and with a notebook filled with pages of notes. He

said it was a lot, but necessary.

These two moments combined with looking at the second planning grant were the

moments that stopped us in our tracks. Here we were, three educators, wanting to design

a school that changed education. We were looking to revolutionize curriculum and

instruction models and spent our time researching the ways schools needed to be

different. But this process of starting a charter school, it looked at schools like starting a

business. Looking back at the process, once we got bogged down in things like

construction, finance, law, furniture, and even corporately produced curriculum materials,

we struggled to move forward. It was suddenly clear to me why business people were the

ones starting schools and not educators. The system isn't set up for educators to change it

from the inside. Interesting or innovative curriculum and instruction appear to have less

value than the business plan.

How are you going to do that?

When I get excited about something, I tend to tell everyone, and I mean everyone.

The barista may ask, "How is your day going?" and I might say, "Great, I am working on

starting a school!" The barista didn't care, and at the time, I am not sure why I told him;

however, in retrospect, I think that during this process I shared with everyone because I

needed accountability. I knew the process was going to be hard and was going to test me,

and if no one knew, it would be too easy to quit. When I go back to the coffee shop, I

wanted that barista to ask how that school is going; I needed that barista to ask how the school is going.

In addition to accountability, there was another layer to sharing with absolutely everyone. This layer was the questioning. When you tell someone you are going to start a school, the reaction is nearly the same each time. There is this moment where they are impressed. This is the best moment, but it is very short-lived. In this moment, the listener almost always says something like, "Wow! That's amazing. I didn't even know someone could do that. So cool." Then, there is usually a pause, and then the questions come. "What kind of school?" "Is it private or one of those charters or something?" "Is that the same as Montessori?" "Is that like the open schools of the 1970s?" "But how are you going to do that?" "Where do you get the money from?" "How will you get a building?" "Well is there a school like this somewhere?" "How do you know it will work?" "How will you find teachers to work in a school like that?" "Where will you get the students from?" or even "Where will you find subs for a school like that?" These were some of the most common questions, but there were many more with which we were bombarded.

I was terrible at answering these questions at first. I did not have any of the answers and often felt like my early answers were something along the lines of "I don't know; I just know it will all work out." However, the more times I got asked the same questions, the better my answers got. By working through the questions, Michael, Danica, and I were being asked individually, we spent our time working together to find the common ground in what parents, educators, and community members wanted to know the most. The questions gave us research points and working points. Often, the people questioning us would apologize for asking so many questions, but all of us would

reassure them that we needed these questions. It was the questions that prepared us to address groups of parents in information sessions; it was the questions that led to us getting an endorsement from the editorial board of our local newspaper; it was the questions that prepared us to present to the school boar```d and be approved; and it was the questions that shaped our final innovation plan that was approved by the state board.

By telling everyone about the school, I was subconsciously setting myself up to be questioned and to be held accountable. I say "subconsciously" because I had honestly not thought about why I was doing it. Often, I was afraid I would look like I was boasting, but the pleasure derived from someone being momentarily impressed was not nearly enough to offset the fear that came from someone looking at me, tilting their head, and saying, "Huh, that sounds interesting, but how are you going to do that?" and me not really even having an answer yet. It was that fear, not the pleasure that motivated me.

Failure Stories

The "Chopped" Mini-Camp

When I had my first child there was so much build up about how beautiful the experience would be. I knew that labor would be difficult, but imagined at the end there would be this magical moment where my child and I would finally be cheek to cheek and all of the difficulties of pregnancy and labor would disappear the instant I saw her sweet, angelic face.

This was not the reality. I was in labor for nearly three days and was so exhausted that I fell asleep during pushing contractions. My daughter inhaled meconium and was quickly swept off to the NICU where she required oxygen. When she was finally released from the NICU, she was examined and the doctor found a heart defect that required a

cardiologist's input. I spent the first day of her life terrified, exhausted, and in disbelief. My first day at TSOI was nearly identical.

Before the doors opened, there had been this endless potential. We imagined what the school could look like, what students could accomplish, and how our days would move in these ways that tapped into a student's true potential and desires to achieve learning. Danica and I stood on the threshold of the entrance, while Michael, in his bright orange vest, directed cars. A new teacher had put together a playlist for every day for the first month to be played as we walked in, so the song "Happy" played quietly as families brought their children into the gates. I had cleared my schedule and was so excited about what this day would hold, and then the students walked through the doors.

In most school years, teacher experience a "honeymoon period." This is a time when for a few weeks the students are too scared to behave in a way that would upset their teacher. While these honeymoons make easing into the year nice, they often come to a shocking end as students get more comfortable with their environment (Isenberg, 2014).

Our honeymoon period lasted exactly five minutes. At our very first morning meeting, two older students, Samuel and Christopher, attempted to steal the show. The boys loved having a circle audience and began yelling anything that would get attention. Another younger student left morning meeting and headed for the door. By midmorning, we had removed all of the flexible seating because students had been bouncing across the room or using the yoga balls as a weapon. The inflatable wiggle seats had a plastic plug that made an awesome projectile if one jumped on the seat. These projectiles were flying across the room all morning our first day. The collaborators looked exhausted by the time we walked to the park, and one students had already had a melt down and threw

everything on the floor in the tinker room. Restorative Justice was coming in handy, and as I walked through the school, many groups were engaged in circle time already.

During exploratory everything seemed to implode. We had people in the building to teach exploratory who had never taught a day in their life, and students who were loving the freedom and open space were attempting to eat them alive. All of the collaborators were so exhausted that we all locked ourselves in the kindergarten room and tried to help each other problem solve everything that went wrong that day. We looked like some type of army who had barely survived a battle. Well, everyone but Peter, who was so excited about the potential and as optimistic as always. About 20 minutes into our first break in the day, a student came to get us to let us know that the woodshop exploratory was locked in the woodshop. When we got there to let them out, we learned that Sam didn't want to be in woodshop, so he locked the teacher and all of the students in.

Danica and I were the only two without a class that day since kindergarten was on a delayed start. We kept walking around, shaking our heads in disbelief and saying, "this is so so bad!" or "What the hell did we do?" I left school that night a bit like Frankenstein, terrified of my own creation. I drank three beers, yelled at everyone in my family, and went to bed hoping the next day would be a re-do. Instead it took seven weeks before we hit our stride. It was the longest, most exhausting

Bringing in Outsiders. Three weeks before students came into our building, we met our first staff member not hired by us. Becky was a special education teacher who would split her time between our school and another school that was the complete opposite of ours. The other school is an alternative school for students in grades seven

through nine where students do a majority of their learning in a blended model (combined online and face to face) with a very structured environment. The mission at this school sounds a bit like it is preparing students after time in prison, with the phrases "prepare students for a productive life" and "help to reconnect with their education." Becky believed wholeheartedly in this model, what she didn't believe in was our model. It took us a month or two after school started to figure that out.

About three weeks after our students started, we started to hear some rumors trickling down from above. Claims that our school was in chaos, that it was a terrible learning environment, that we were not doing a good job, and that nobody was learning anything. Suddenly higher level administrators were walking through and looking at us astonished that we even thought this would work. They'd whisper in corners, and complain to us about the open space. They would say, "There isn't enough structure for these kids!" First, it didn't take too long to realize it was all of our support staff, and primarily Becky, who were complaining up the ladder. They couldn't figure out how to support students in an environment like ours, so instead of trying, they would complain about it not working. Becky actually serviced so few students in her time in the building, that it actually took us a couple days to notice when she stopped showing up. She was so ineffective, that in a school with only 10 total staff members, we didn't notice she was missing. Second, we realized that we started changing to match what the outsiders thought we should look like to meet the needs of just a handful of students. Before long, there were signs for expected behaviors all over the building, and we were using a Positive Behavior Support System (PBIS) despite all of us being fairly opposed to most PBIS systems. This is exactly what we feared when we joined a larger system.

Becky clearly wasn't the only one complaining up the ladder. A school psych was in our building one day and quickly launched into her own defense without any prompting. Michael simply greeted her one afternoon and she responded with "I just want you to know that I love it here, and I would never say anything bad about you guys or the school." Her protestation confirmed our suspicions that the social worker was also complaining. And then we had heard from our school nurse that the behavior specialist, the one who seemed to be really supportive, was complaining about us to the director of special education. It was her ideas that sparked our new PBIS system and the signs all over our building, but these changes were not enough for her. It did not appear she would be happy with our school until it looked like all of the other schools she was used to working in.

It all came to a head when we learned that the nurse, the one who had told on the behavior specialist, was also complaining. One afternoon in September we were contacted by our assistant superintendent of K-8 schools, Wes, to make an appointment to tour our building with the director of facilities. The purpose of the visit was to check our cleaning because someone (we learned through the conversation that it was the nurse) had complained that we were not meeting cleaning standards because the students were doing all of the cleaning. She was very concerned about "flu season" which apparently warranted a call to the director of special education, who contacted the director of facilities, and all of this happened without anyone talking to us. It was true that kids were responsible for cleaning the building because we were trying to teach them personal responsibility; however, adults were also coming behind the students and cleaning with the appropriate disinfectants. If she had bothered to ask us, instead of voicing her

concerns above us, we could have showed her our detailed cleaning schedule, but she didn't. So here we were spending our entire plan time to show the assistant superintendent and facilities director our plan for keeping the building clean. By the end of the conversation and after showing our cleaning checklist the director of facilities acknowledged, "You all are going above and beyond what is expected."

Frustrated, I looked at Wes and said, "We have only been open for six weeks, and it is hard enough as it is without people talking behind our backs. This needs to stop. We just wasted valuable plan time showing you things that we could have been answered in five minutes if the person who lodged the complaint came straight to us." Wes agreed that this was frustrating and understood why we were getting tired of this. Michael said, "We need people in this building who walk in and see energy and potential; we don't need people who walk in and see chaos. If they see chaos, then that's fine, but this isn't the place for them." Michael was absolutely right, but I also noticed we had been appointed these people (a nurse, behavior specialist, special education teacher, social worker, school psych, and a kitchen manager) and we had not had the opportunity to share our mission and vision with them. All they saw was a school with open spaces, but had no understanding of what we wanted to achieve.

One week later we scheduled a meeting with most of this team to go over our mission and vision. Some of them seemed to get it and some did not, but the complaints stopped. We were very explicit in letting them know that we knew they were complaining; we let them know that as "support staff," this wasn't incredibly supportive; we reminded them that we had only been open for seven weeks at this time and that they needed to exhibit more patience if they wanted to help us; we pointed out that none of

them had ever been through the process of opening a new school and let them know it

wasn't fair for them to hold us to the standards of schools that had been operating for

decades.

It had already been decided that Becky would be working at her other school full

time, with a transition happening at the beginning of October. She continued to take sick

time for most of the times she was supposed to be in our building, but it was almost

easier without her there since she was too inconsistent to be helpful and spent most of her

time in our school sitting on her computer. Our neediest students were not getting their

needs met, but we really needed the right person to do that. We spoke with the director of

special education and were adamant that we did not want a special education teacher in

our building that we did not have a say in picking. Partnering with the larger school

district has mostly been amazing, with incredible support, but having people appointed to

our school who just saw "chaos" but no "potential" made an already stressful first six

weeks of school even more stressful. We knew there would hiccups, but did not realize

how much of our early energy would be spent dealing with hiccups that were not part of

our control.

<div align="center">**Imaginary Barriers**</div>

Culture Building

Showing people around the school had become a pretty common occurrence after

we were open for a month or so. One day in October, I was walking a group of teachers

around the building and they asked what the hardest thing had been so far. I was looking

at a carpet with students in grades 1-2 sitting in a circle, and it took very little thought to

see right there the hardest thing. I said, "See those 18 kids right there? None of them went to school with each other last year. Building culture has been the hardest thing!"

We came into the school year with our culture as founders and there was a culture we were building with the new collaborators. We had solid relationships and honestly everyone seemed to connect well and get along great, plus we all shared the vision. The students had come into the year with a clean slate. No culture existed. Kids did not know each other. Kids did not know the teachers. Kids did not know the building. Many of their parents had made this choice for them. They felt no responsibility to anyone or anything connected to the school. Research informed us that if we gave students freedom and choice it would minimize behavioral issues because the students would feel empowered. What we didn't account for is how students would handle the freedom without a relationship to anything

This lack of culture permeated everything. We thought student groups would emerge out of student choice, and we thought freedom and mutual respect would breed responsibility and love for the environment. What we found instead was that our students were programmed to hate the "system of school," and they were going to rage against that regardless of how much we cared in the beginning. They also didn't even believe that we cared. Every day felt a bit like a battle.

We had several students who were acting out and in the middle of it, they would shout "What, aren't you going to send me home?" When we would talk to them, they would explain that was what would happen at their old school. One student in particular, Bruno, spent an afternoon dumping out every bin of art supplies onto the floor. As he picked up each box, he stared at his collaborator and yelled "Are you going to send me

home now?" and spiked the box of supplies on the floor. We learned from his mother that his old school sent him home most days by 9:30 a.m. He was trying to figure out what it would take here to be able to miss school every day. We were struggling to get Bruno on board because he carried with him all of the baggage from his previous experience with school. He was just waiting, even prompting, for us to show what he believed to be our true colors.

What was most shocking was that our students frequently saw boundaries where boundaries didn't even exist. For instance, I would ask my own child things like, "Why don't you explore book writing for your project?" and she would say "We aren't allowed to?" I would push a bit and ask her why, and she would insist that her teacher said so. Her teacher had never actually said no, but my child was certain she didn't have freedom because she had previously gone to school where she was not an agent of her own learning. Much like my daughter, imaginary boundaries prevented students from designing the school how they wanted it. There are opportunities to start clubs, build freely in the woodshop, have dances, and create based on the students' own desires; yet the students have struggled to advocate for those opportunities. For this reason, they have yet to make the space their own, and it has delayed the culture building. For us, it has also been difficult to determine when it is still their own if we suggest it.

As I write this, we are about half way through the year, and the students are still struggling to build and design their space and culture, although it is slowly getting better, but I believe we are still struggling to let go of the power to have them do so. I personally find myself in this constant battle of giving up power and freedom and fearing that if I do, the students will fall behind, unable to perform on state tests or be successful in the next

grade. The internal struggle continues as I realize that we are not trying to create students who can perform on a test, but I also recognize that we are beholden to test scores for funding. Because all of this is happening at once, it is really difficult to identify which piece is preventing the culture building. Is it the students who are not connected to each other or the space? Is it the imaginary boundaries firmly engrained in the students from prior school experience? Is it us fearing a loss of control? Or is it us being driven by the standardized test scores or creating our own imaginary barriers? We will continue to wrestle with these questions, likely for years.

Just Leap

In order to write this dissertation, I have been swimming in research on education reform. There is a great deal out there that shows that what we want to achieve works better than the traditional model at preparing students for life beyond school. However, there is also research that shows that what we want to do is merely a repeat of everything that has been tried and failed in the education reform of the 1970s. Open space learning was a fad that came and went by the early 1980s. Flexible grade levels have made appearances on and off starting back at the one room school house and moving into modern day. Project based learning has been tried, and small class sizes, and student directed learning have as well, all without enough impact to stick. Furthermore, despite the pieces of research we have found that says these are what is best for students, there is also an abundance of research that shows that these are ineffective or minimally effective as well.

John Hattie publishes a list of factors that influence student achievement based on a mega-analysis of research literature based on 800 meta-analyses. His 2017 list puts

many of the core elements of our school in the category of small effect size in comparison to some more traditional instructional models. For instance, open classrooms have a $d = .01$, student control of learning has a $d = .02$, and multi-age classrooms has a $d = .04$. Some of the elements of our model have a medium effect, like mindfulness with a $d = .29$ or student-centered teaching with a $d = .36$, but these are much smaller effects than Direct Instruction with a $d = .6$ or rehearsal and memorization with a $d = .73$.

Knowing this research makes it difficult sometimes to not just embrace the traditional model. Yet, I have two concerns with this research in particular of which I frequently remind myself. First, he is measuring what influences student achievement in schools. As established earlier, I do not believe the point of school to be school. For instance, when I need to get something done for work, I do not go find a closed or quiet classroom in which to do my work. I frequent coffee shops. I have learned as an adult to tune out conversations around me and get to work, but I also appreciate the social nature of public space. In fact, existing in public space is actually beneficial to our health. Susan Pinker (2017) gave a TED Talk looking at the greatest predictors of long life based on the research of Julianna Holt-Lunstad from Brigham Young University. In the talk, Pinker lists the factors that will most likely lead to a long life, and says that the research was surprising because the greatest factor is "something that's called social integration. This means how much you interact with people as you move through your day. How many people do you talk to? And these mean both your weak and your strong bonds, so not just the people you're really close to, who mean a lot to you, but, like, do you talk to the guy who makes your coffee? Do you talk to the postman?" She says the research says these

factors are better predictors of how long you will live than exercise or even better than if

you have had a cardiac event.