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AVOIDING FATALISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION:
TRANSFORMING THE INSTITUTION FROM WITHIN

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Abstract

This study sought to determine what could be learned from established career teachers (sometimes referred to as “survivor teachers”) about how they are able to function and experience satisfaction within a formal educational institution while simultaneously working to transform the institution and their communities. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from four Oklahoma public school teachers. Participant responses to these interviews suggested four major themes, or skills and sensibilities, that helped teachers “survive” the system as they worked to transform it. These themes included: teaching authentically, reconciling personal and institutional tensions, avoiding isolation through building community, and focusing on joy. At the conclusion of the study, I explore possible implications for myself, other educators, and teacher education.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Mrs. Cox, this is great, but we never actually get a chance to *do* any of this." There was a moment of silence as everyone in the room absorbed this statement. My eighth grade United States history class was finishing up a unit on the Constitution, and I was testing their comprehension of the Bill of Rights with some recent court cases involving the fourth and fifth amendments. It was one of those beautiful moments where curriculum and real-life wonderfully intersected. The students were engaged and enjoying the opportunity to interpret cases and hand down their verdicts. They were applying their knowledge of the amendments well, and I was impressed with the success of the lesson. Then, the illusion was shattered with one simple statement from a fourteen year old girl. My students turned to look at me, anxious to hear how I would respond. I paused. As a new teacher, I pondered the correct way to move forward. I decided to throw caution to the wind: "Tell me more."

I opened the room for discussion. I asked them about their education and about their feelings of efficacy in their communities. Their perceptions seemed to be that they were expected to become good citizens and exercise their rights, but were rarely given opportunities to do so in their everyday lives, especially during the school day. Essentially, their position was this: they are told what to do, where to go, and how to think for about 12 years, and then they are thrust into the world when they turn 18 and declared ready for adulthood. Then, everyone laments that the young people are lazy, apathetic, and simple-minded.

My students seemed to think the educational system was putting them into a position where they could not win. We [their teachers, principals, parents, and society]

were demanding certain skills on the surface (e.g., to "ask questions," "think for yourself," "approach and solve problems creatively") that they did not see as being consistent with the message they received within the structure of the educational institution (e.g., "follow the rules," "get the 'right' answer," "grades are more important than the learning process"). While some of the conversation focused on trivial issues one might expect from eighth graders, I was generally impressed with their insights. They wanted to know why they were doing this whole school thing. What was the true goal of compulsory schooling and the public education system? Was it to help produce creative, critical-thinking citizens who would contribute to and improve upon their communities? If so, when would they learn to be creative, critical-thinkers? When would they be asked to contribute and improve their communities? They were suspicious. And I had to admit it—I was suspicious, too.

In public schools, students are encouraged to function in communities through short, well-meaning phrases such as: "don't be bullies," "appreciate diversity," "think for yourself," "never be afraid to ask questions," and "find your voice." In reality, though, there is a hidden, implicit curriculum (and sometimes *explicit* curriculum) that pushes against those very lessons and teaches students to keep their heads down, get ahead, and put all of that other stuff second to getting into college and getting a job with money, so they can be "successful" (Anyon, 1979). If we say we want critical thinkers so our democracy can flourish, and if we say our citizens should exercise their rights, why are we not giving them more opportunities to learn those behaviors in educational settings? If democracy requires participation and claims to value the diversity of ideas, why did my students feel that their voices did not matter?

My students' suspicions about the purpose of their education and my own perceptions that authentic education was being lost in the bureaucratic functions of the institution found some traction in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire (1970/2000) argues that a barrier to transforming the educational system (and the dominant structures of the world as whole) is a "banking concept of education," in which "the teacher is the depositor" of knowledge and the "best" students are those who "meekly...permit themselves to be filled" (p. 72). He describes students within a banking concept of education as "oppressed" because the "people themselves...are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this...misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human" (Freire, 2000, p. 72).

According to Freire (2000), to be fully human means to be able to interact with, question, and reflect on the world; banking education stunts and discourages this process in the minds of students, serving the interests of the existing power structures (p. 73). To combat this issue, Freire urges educators to help shift the mentality of education. He calls for the goals of "deposit-making" to be replaced with the goals of "posing...the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (p. 79). Freire argues that this "problem-posing education" transforms the teacher-student relationship and establishes "an authentic form of thought and action" by allowing people to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in transformation," as a world that is "*becoming"* (pp. 79-84).

While Freire posits the idea of moving to "problem-posing education" as a solution to the ailments of the institution, the idea that the entire American education system is going to abandon its "banking" practices overnight is naive, even by Freire's own admission, because that would mean those who are oppressing (intentionally or not) would have to knowingly abandon a system that is structured by these practices to keep their power and privileges in place. In addition, there may even be resistance from those who are oppressed, because the status quo that stifles freedom also offers a level of stability (Freire, 2000, p. 46). How, then, can teachers be authentic "problem-posing" educators *within* a system that demands accountability for "banking" education?

Long after that class ended, I found myself thinking of our discussion. I felt guilty that I did not have better answers for the students. As I continued in my work, I began to feel guilty for helping perpetuate a system that I felt was flawed. As I talked to colleagues in my school and in my graduate courses, I came to realize that many of them shared my sense of guilt. Some days the weight of the institution and the enormity of the problems were so heavy on our shoulders that we felt we could not breathe. We would share tear-filled, sometimes cynical conversations, questioning (like our students) exactly what we were doing. We came into this profession to make a difference and to empower our students, but on most days it felt as if we were just treading water. We had hopes of a better world, but felt the pressure, as our students did, to conform to the institution. After all, the institution "signed our paychecks".

In fact, the idea that there is a problem with the educational institution in the United States is not new. American business professionals, teachers, parents, politicians, and other citizens have repeatedly claimed that communication, critical

thinking, logic and problem solving skills are the most important skills a student can learn (Adams, 2014; Bersin, 2012; Goo, 2015). They all seem to agree that educators should be training well-informed citizens who can generate creative solutions to the world's problems. Why, then, are we still mourning the absence of these skills in graduates from the public education system in America? If we agree on the basic goals, why are we still struggling to achieve them?

For decades, various critics have decried the failures of the American public school system. However, many of these critiques fail to cite a lack of education for freedom and democracy as the reason for this failure. Instead, their focus seems to center on the idea that America is falling behind because graduates from the system are not ready for the current global job market. They stress low test scores compared to other nations, specifically in the realms of mathematics and science (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Finn, 1990; Heise, 1994; National Science Foundation, 2003; Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). To remedy these failures, government policies and reformers have aimed at making American schools and teachers more accountable and "highly effective" through sweeping, top-down programs such as No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). In the hope of improving the skills of all American students and closing achievement gaps, such programs focus heavily on what they purport to be "rigorous" standards, "high quality" education, and quantifying "success" based on standardized test results and data-driven evaluations of teacher accountability.

However, despite multiple attempts at reforming the school system, many Americans are still disgruntled with an apparent lack of results. After all, recent headlines are still reporting the same failures as the headlines and reports of the 1980s. Another suggested solution for American school failure has been a growing movement toward providing alternatives to the traditional public school, such as charter schools, public schools, and online schools (Houser, Krutka, Province-Roberts, Pennington, & Faili-Coerver, 2016). For example, in Oklahoma (the state in which my study takes place), the hot-button issue of 2016 was a debate over school vouchers. Senate Bill 609, authored by Clark Jolley, would have allowed parents who opted to put their students into alternative schools (including, but not limited to, charter schools, private schools, and home schools) to have access to 80% of the funding that would otherwise have been used for their children in their assigned public schools (Oklahoma Education Empowerment Scholarship Act, 2015). Proponents of this bill argued that the creation of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) would help low-income families who could not normally afford private tuition have more control over their children's schooling and create greater equity in education (Stipek, 2016). It was ultimately decided that the bill would not be considered in the 2016 legislative session due to its controversial reception amid a time of budget crisis and teacher shortfall in the state. However, many Oklahomans remain dedicated to the voucher system, claiming that "school choice," including the choice to go outside of the public school system, is essential if educational reform is to be successful in creating an American citizenry that can compete in the global market and contribute to a democratic society.

If we have been trying for decades to “fix” the American education system, why is it still broken? Ultimately, proposed solutions have not effectively addressed the fundamental issues in the system. National programs aimed at making American public education more effective have centered on top-down approaches that have a strong emphasis on accountability and quantifiable results (often via tests). While striving to improve performance is an admirable goal, these programs tend to stress data management and test results while avoiding issues of equity and glossing over skills and values that are not as easy to quantify, such as problem-solving and participation in the community (Houser et al., 2016; Radin, 2006; Wang, 2011). The problem with the school choice movement is that it tends to advocate a move *outside* the traditional public education system, rather than seeking to improve the institution itself. This, on the surface, does not sound antithetical to democracy or freedom; however, concerns remain about equity and the school choice movement’s ability to close racial and socio-economic achievement gaps (Goyette, 2008; Rangel, 2012; Wang, 2011).

At the end of the day, none of the current reform movements seem to be doing much to get the American people (teachers, parents, citizens) what we say we want: functioning, contributing, critically-thinking citizens dedicated to solving the problems of a democratic society. Despite the money the American government and citizens continue to contribute to these types of reforms, McKinsey & Company (2007) reported that “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” because it is *who* is inside the classroom that effects the most measurable outcomes (p. 43). While well-intentioned, prevailing calls for reform seem to focus on a performance culture, valuing top-down, “one-size fits all” approaches that consistently oversimplify

the complex nature of American schooling and ignore the minds of the professionals who work within the system (Radin, 2006). If teachers are consistently ignored, how can they work to improve the system of education?

Many educators find themselves nodding along to the professional literature that addresses the institution's ailments and its failure to authentically educate students for living and participating in a nation—and world—that claims to value freedom and democracy (Freire, 2000; Anyon, 1980; Dewey, 2008; Greene, 1988). However, this leads them face-to-face with a difficult reality. The problem is overwhelming because it is *not* singular. There is not an overnight solution that will fix the situation for teachers and students everywhere.

Coupled with ongoing pressures of the accountability culture in public schools, confrontation with the enormity of our problems can foster feelings of hopelessness, despair, and fatigue that lead teachers to either leave the profession or to become disillusioned within their classrooms. In popular culture and political discussions, many refer to this fatigue and hopelessness as "teacher burnout." Various studies (Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1983; Huberman, 1993; Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011) have focused on the topic of burnout, linking it to increased rates of teacher turnover and apathy.

Recently, teacher burnout has been a topic of discussion in Oklahoma. Between budget crises, calls for vouchers, low pay, and an apparent lack of respect for teachers within state government, it is easy to understand why many Oklahoma teachers are considering the option of leaving the state, or the profession altogether. According to an Oklahoma State School Boards Association (OSSBA) survey, Oklahoma school "districts reported 542 teaching vacancies as of Aug. 1," the first day of the 2016 school

year for Oklahoma City Public Schools (OSSBA, 2016). These vacancies were "widespread" and not simply confined to smaller districts, with "more than half of school leaders" reporting that "hiring teachers was more difficult this year compared to last year" (OSSBA, 2016). This survey demonstrates that it is becoming increasingly difficult to retain Oklahoma public school teachers.

While there are various reasons and causes for burnout in the teaching profession, feelings of hopelessness or disenchantment with the system are ranked high among them. In *The Dialectic of Freedom,* Maxine Greene (1988) describes this attitude as "fatalism." Like Freire, Greene believes the current system of education is "antithetical" to "an education for freedom" as it molds students "into existing social and economic structures, to what is given, to what is inescapably *there*" (pp. 12, 22). Both students and teachers find themselves in a system that dooms them to see "existing structures as...objective 'realities', impervious to transformation" (Greene, 1988, p. 22). In short, Greene describes fatalism as an attitude that concedes what currently *is* as inevitable and robs a person of the authentic freedom to be the "'author' of one's world," of what *could be* (p. 22). Fatalism can lead people either to become "submerged" in the system, or, in a radical attempt to cut themselves loose from the "orders and controls" of the system, to become "free-floating" (Greene, 1988, p. 9).

Allowing ourselves to succumb to the power of fatalistic thinking creates new issues rather than solving the old ones. Adopting a fatalistic view of the world leaves teachers with two options. We can either become "free-floaters" who give up on the system and walk away from teaching, allowing the system to continue without us, or we can become "submerged," entrenching ourselves in the work of the system,

perpetuating the institution and its definition of success. Although perhaps tempting, neither option fixes the system or fosters freedom for teachers *or* their students. Even if we leave the profession entirely, the system will follow us. The education system impacts the communities we live in, whether or not we participate in it directly. Leaving the profession allows the institution to be shaped by those who have not reflected on the implications of the current system; therefore, the system's structures remain unchecked and unchanged. However, if teachers remain and become submerged, they become complicit in perpetuating a flawed system incompatible with their own freedom and worldviews.

To further the problem, students are not blind to the propensity of their teachers to become worn down by the system as they move forward in their careers. At the completion of my first year, a student left me a note: "I know you probably won't do this as much as you teach more, but keep interacting with your students like you did with us." Another, in my second year, asked how long I had been teaching. When I responded that it was my second year, she remarked, "I can tell." Taken aback, I asked her to elaborate. "You still look happy to be here and be around us." These comments demonstrate that students know teachers have a tendency to become fatalistic and cynical to the system. If they know we are disillusioned by the system, what right do we have to expect them to look to "what could be?"

This leads me to believe we, as teachers, must find ways to be part of the solution, which involves, in some way, remaining part of and inside the institution. However, how can teachers do this when the structures of the system seem to press in upon us on a daily basis? When teachers are vulnerable every second of every day, it

can feel like a battle to merely preserve our mental and physical well-being. In my first two years, I sometimes struggled to eat or sleep enough. Often, the weights of our teaching responsibilities and raw emotions can be soul-crushing if we allow them. While physical survival is obviously important, it is not enough for teachers to limp through their careers, their only goal being to "make it" through to retirement. In order to affect positive change in our schools and communities, we must allow ourselves to nurture our passions and our "selves" so that we can both survive and *thrive* within our educational institutions. True survivor teachers, then, not only function within the existing systems of public education, but also manage to survive with their souls intact, thus experiencing not only the challenges of teaching but also the joys and satisfactions of personal fulfillment.

As a beginning teacher, I wondered how other teachers were able to do this. How were they able to hold or manage these tensions? How could teachers avoid fatalistic approaches and foster authentic, participatory education while simultaneously existing within an institution that demands perpetuation rather than transformation? What can early career teachers, such as myself, learn from established, career teachers' (referred to as "survivor teachers" throughout the study) stories about how they were able to both function and thrive within formal educational institutions while simultaneously working to *transform* these institutions and their communities?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

The beginning of my research was born out of my feelings of frustration in the classroom. I felt something was wrong with the system, but I struggled to determine (and continue to work through) exactly what it was. I knew I wanted things to be different, but how could they ever be? The public education system has existed for a long time; who was I to suggest an alternative when I could not even articulate a realistic solution? Yet, if I did nothing, I would continue to feel frustrated. How would I be able to "survive" with my identity and soul intact if I continued to work within, and thereby help perpetuate, an institution I felt was flawed? I wondered how other teachers managed to survive their teaching careers while maintaining feelings of personal satisfaction. I decided that my research should pursue these questions in an effort to find purpose within my teaching career.

Phenomenology and Existentialism

My research question emerged from my personal struggles to make meaning of my world, situating the study within a framework of phenomenology, or lived experience, and existentialist thought. The philosophy of phenomenology is concerned with "experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Similarly, existentialism explores the role of individuals in constructing meaning from their world. In an existential worldview, Broudy (1971) explains, "human reality" is found in the "striving" or the "tension between what is and what might be" (p. 161). Man makes meaning for himself and finds "authentic freedom" through exploring "everyday ordinary existence" (Barret, 1947, p. 29). John Dewey (1963) is often included in references to existentialist thought

as he applies this movement to educational philosophy. Dewey (1963) argues that authentic education is found in providing opportunities for students to have "educative experiences" necessary to explore their existence and to develop a "desire to go on learning" (p. 49). Through their exploration of personal experiences, individuals are led to greater consciousness of their own existence. Existentialist thinkers believe this consciousness also reveals a responsibility to act, to avoid slipping "into thinghood" by becoming comfortable with "custom and routine" (Broudy, 1971, pp. 161-166).

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer alludes to existentialist philosophy as he explains the roles of teachers in transforming educational systems. Palmer (2007) emphasizes the necessity of delving into "the heart of a teacher," or the "self that teaches" (p. 4). He argues that we as teachers can find alternatives to waiting for "external 'fixes'" to transform educational institutions if we can remember that "institutions are also 'us'" (Palmer, 2007, p. 20). As participants in educational institutions, teachers have a responsibility to change them. By reclaiming our "belief in the power…to transform" our work and recover our "identity and integrity," we as teachers wield power that could "lead to revolution" (Palmer, 2007, pp. 20-21). As teachers "re-member" ourselves, our identity, and our integrity, we "develop the *authority* to teach," to stand our ground "in the midst of the complex forces of both the classroom and...life." This is because our teaching comes from our own truth (Palmer, 2007, p. 34). Palmer's insistence that teachers reclaim some control over our institutions through validating our own experiences connects existentialism firmly to theories of education reform.

While existentialism emphasizes the responsibility of individuals to make our own meaning in the world and to exercise freedom to act on that meaning, I do not interpret the philosophy to mean that we, as individuals, are *purely* bound to our individual wants or that we must always act alone. As Barrett (1947) argues, our existence "is always *in* the world and *with* others" (p. 29). In order to help me make meaning of my own experiences, I designed a study that would allow me to explore how others within my profession interpreted their experiences within the institution of public education. Since those others share my profession, my gender, and many of my concerns, reflection on their thoughts and actions contributed significantly to my development.

The Need to "Name" The World

My inability to clearly articulate significant problems within public education formed the foundation of my frustration with the system. How could I hope to fix problems I could not describe? For Freire (2000), "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 86). In order to change a system from what it *is* to what it *could be*, people must be able to "name" the realities of their institutions and "name" the problems and obstacles that prevent their transformation (Freire, 2000; Greene, 1988). If educators hope to transform the current system, we must begin to name our situations, so we can give hope to ourselves and our students that what *is* does not equal what *must be*. My desire to name the world helped frame my research and was influenced by two scholars in particular.

Paolo Freire and Problem-Posing Education. Paulo Freire (2000) argues that social changes in communities at large are linked to change within our educational

systems. Human beings are built in praxis, "in action-reflection," as they attempt to "*name* the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 88). By speaking "the true word… [they] transform the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 88). According to Freire, it is the "right of everyone" to "*name* the world," but this cannot be done alone; dialogue is "an existential necessity" that allows human beings to "achieve significance" (Freire, 2000, p. 88). Based on this argument, both teachers and students have the right to seek out and name—and thereby transform—the structures of the worlds in which they exist.

According to Freire (2000), present systems of education subscribe to a "banking concept of education" that denies dialogue in order to preserve the interests of institutions and the world as they currently exist. Within these institutions, students are simply receptacles for the knowledge their teachers deposit within them. This knowledge is largely made up of what students need to know in order to succeed within, and thereby perpetuate, existing structures. Freire (2000) describes the banking concept of education as oppressive, because:

> Apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p. 72).

The banking concept of education stifles students' "creative power" which "serves the interests of the oppressors who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (Freire, 2000, p. 73). An oppressor, according to Freire (2000), is anyone who fails "to recognize others as persons" or who hinders their "pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person" (p. 55). Generally, oppressors feel they benefit

from the system as it exists. Therefore, in order to preserve their interests, oppressors respond quickly and negatively to educational reforms that "stimulate the critical faculties" (Freire, 2000, pp. 73-74).

To transform the oppressive structures of the world, Freire argues that we must transform the oppressive structures within education. Educators should work to shift the goals of "deposit-making" to the goals of "posing...the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (p. 79). By moving toward "problem-posing education," we would no longer be working to "integrate" ourselves (and our students) "into the structure of oppression" (Freire, 2000, p. 74). Instead teachers should work to "transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (Freire, 2000, p. 74). For Freire (2000), "revolutionary educator[s]...must be partners of the students," working along with them to "engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization" (p. 75). Problem-posing education helps build dialogue between teachers and students, redefining their relationships so they can work together to transform oppressive structures.

While appreciating Freire's suggestions as a possible solution for the ailments of the current public education system, I had some questions about how to put problem-posing education into practice. I found myself nodding along with Freire's accusations about the banking concept of education, but I felt an overwhelming frustration. What he was saying seemed to be true, but what was I to do about it? As Freire (2000) says, "the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces" the idea that our situation is "fated and unalterable" (p. 85). I was a young teacher trying to establish myself in a career. I knew

I would not be able to change the structures overnight. How could I work toward a problem-posing education in a system that demanded accountability for bank deposits?

Maxine Greene, Fatalism, and Freedom. Maxine Greene (1988) also discusses the importance of naming institutional realities and obstacles in order to achieve social transformation. She argues that "when people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change" they cannot be truly free (Greene, 1988, p. 9). If individuals are incapable of identifying existing "structures, they can scarcely think of breaking through them" to transform the system (Greene, 1988, p. 20). In this state, people may adopt fatalistic attitudes about their world and their existence in it. They may begin to "accept existing structures as…fated" and content themselves with living within those structures as "objective 'realities'…impervious to change" (Greene, 1988, p. 22).

Such a fatalistic worldview can lead individuals to become "cynical about reform" and abandon their hope for "bringing about change in the world" (Greene, 1988, p. 20). These individuals often seek freedom from an "unchangeable" world in one of two ways. On the one hand, some people choose to "submerge" themselves further in the system (Greene, 1988). By accepting the system as it exists, they feel "free" from the responsibility of action. They withdraw, taking "refuge" within themselves so they can "function as they are expected to do" (Greene, 1988, p. 20). In other words, they become functionaries within the system and prop up the existing structures. This choice to submerge brings to mind the old saying, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

The other option involves “uprooting” from the system entirely to become “free-floating” (Greene, 1988, p. 9). Here, individuals become “strangers” to the system through their “desperate attempts to break loose from pre-established orders and controls” (Greene, 1988, p. 9). Because they no longer exist within the institution and are therefore “free” from the constraints of the institutional structures, they feel absolved because they are no longer part of the problem. While this option provides an opportunity to escape the immediate conditions of the system, it does not allow individuals to change the institutional realities of the system.

These responses to daunting institutional structures are common; however, Greene explains that neither option provides a path to authentic freedom. Instead, these options lead to what she terms “negative freedom,” or the “right not to be interfered with or coerced” (Greene, 1988, p. 17). Yet, freedom is more than being free “from” things or being free to “not” take action. According to Greene (1988), authentic freedom is only achieved when “artificial barriers” are “perceived as...human creations” rather than as natural occurrences (p. 9). Authentic freedom involves freedom *to* make an impact on the world in which we exist. When we have discovered this, we as individuals are empowered to name the obstacles constraining us and to imagine alternatives to our conditions. It is through dialogue, exploring paradox, and engaging in what Greene (1988) calls “the dialectic of freedom” that we can effectively pursue *true* freedom.

Greene’s explanation of common human reactions to fatalistic thinking and its impact on freedom is relevant to the current system of education. Greene (1988) describes the existing public education system as “antithetical” to “an education for

freedom" (p. 12). Teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of the institution. There are papers to grade, tests to administer, and "standards" to meet to ensure that students are prepared for "success" in the world that exists. Those grades, tests, and standards are all handed down to the teachers as measures of the institution's definition of success. In the daily grind of the school system, "teachers and administrators" are made to "see themselves as functionaries…geared to turning out products" that meet "standards of quality control" while little is done to empower students and teachers to "create spaces of dialogue...and uncover humanizing possibilities" (Greene, 1988, p. 13). Faced with the crushing realities of the public school structure, some teachers become "submerged" in the system, choosing to "be silent" within their classrooms, while others become "free-floaters," abandoning their careers and leaving the institution entirely (Greene, 1988, p. 14). As a young teacher, I have seen many teachers burn out in both capacities. Either they become "cogs in the machine" and perpetuate the system, or they grow disillusioned with the system and leave the "machine" to function without them. Ultimately, neither of these options fosters true freedom or satisfaction.

As Greene (1988) argues, "a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own" (p. 14). How can teachers find freedom and personal satisfaction within a system that demands "accountability" to what *is* while leaving little room to consider what *could be?* Perhaps insight may be found in the dialectic between the aloof detachment of the "free-floater" and the rigid "determinism" of the functionary (Greene, 1988, p. 10). In designing this study, I hoped to learn from the experience of survivor teachers who somehow navigated this paradox, avoiding or effectively contending with the pitfalls of

fatalism and actually experiencing joy and fulfillment in their chosen careers. How did they manage to stay within the system while also working to transform its structures?

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study focuses on the existential challenges of teaching within the current public educational system. As one who is still relatively new to the profession, I wonder how I can better manage the many tensions experienced within the field. How can I, and others like me, avoid fatalistic approaches and foster authentic, participatory education while simultaneously existing within an institution that seems to demand perpetuation rather than positive transformation? To address these questions, I decided to try to learn from the stories and experiences of established career teachers. How are teacher survivors able to function and thrive within formal educational institutions while simultaneously working to *transform* these institutions and their communities?

Design

To investigate the research questions, I used a basic qualitative design with a semi-structured interview process. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research concerns itself with questions of "understanding how people interpret their experiences" and "construct their worlds" rather than questions of "how much" or "how many" (p. 5). I wanted to understand how established, career teachers interpreted their ability to achieve personal success and remain hopeful within an institution that has a reputation for burning people out. This emphasis on experience and interpretation situated my study most appropriately within the scope of qualitative research.

However, the umbrella of qualitative research is quite large and there are multiple variations within it. My study is most closely influenced by the philosophies of phenomenology and grounded theory. In pursuing the research questions, I wanted to discover ways in which survivor teachers interpreted their teaching experiences within

the public education system in the hope of better understanding how they survived, but also how they thrived, or maintained feelings of personal success, satisfaction, and joy within the system. Because I wanted to understand the "essence" of a particular shared experience, or phenomenon, my research design drew on the philosophy of phenomenology (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). However, while I wanted to understand the essence of a particular phenomenon, my ultimate goal was to understand and explain *how* these teachers were able to arrive at the phenomenon of simultaneously surviving within and working to transform the system of public education. This drive to build "substantive theory" around a "specific, everyday-world situation" oriented my work toward the realm of grounded theory research (Merriam, 2009, p. 30).

Selection of Participants

As in many forms of qualitative research, I used a purposeful criterion-sampling approach in choosing my participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). According to Creswell (2007), this form of sampling is used in phenomenological studies to ensure that participants have experiences related to the phenomenon (p. 128). With this in mind, I set a number of criteria for determining participant eligibility. Participants needed to have at least ten years of experience in a secondary (6-12) public education classroom, to have experience as a secondary (6-12) social studies or language arts classroom teacher, and to be actively involved with the public education system. The requirement of ten years of experience was to ensure participants were "established" in their teaching careers. I limited the scope of teaching experience to secondary social studies and language arts teachers because I was interested in teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach for citizenship, and I anticipated the philosophies behind these

disciplines were most likely to foster citizenship discussions within the interview process.

A primary motivation in my research was to find potential implications for my own practice. As I am a secondary social studies teacher, implications for my own practice were most likely to be found when studying participants in comparable positions and fields of study. Finally, the requirement for active involvement with public education meant that participants were currently engaged with the education system and aware of the present realities within the classroom.

Creswell (2007) suggests that an appropriate number of participants in a phenomenological study is between three and ten (p. 126). I selected four teachers to undergo semi-structured interviews. All four participants were white females, though this was not a specific criterion of inclusion/exclusion in determining participation. Two teachers had the majority of their experience at the middle school level, while two teachers had the majority of their experience at the high school level. Of the four teachers, two had more than 15 years of experience, and two had between 10-15 years of experience. Two participants were still currently teaching in secondary public schools in Oklahoma, while two participants were no longer in the public school classroom but were actively involved in the public education system.

The first participant, Michelle, was a retired English teacher. She retired after 39 years of experience in a variety of grade levels, with the majority of those years spent as a high school English teacher in a suburban district in Oklahoma. Although no longer teaching, Michelle was chosen as a participant because of the longevity of her career

and her active involvement with public education through a personal blog that advocates for current teachers, informing the public about education policy.

The next participant, Paula, had also left the classroom after 18 years of experience as a social studies teacher. Paula worked 12 of those 18 years in a suburban high school setting. She taught various subjects but spent most of her time teaching Advanced Placement (AP) United States History. After those 18 years, she left to pursue a doctoral degree in education. She now works at a public university as an education professor, actively preparing students to become Oklahoma's future public educators. Her continued interest in working to invest in the public education system, in addition to her experience as a public school educator, made Paula an excellent choice.

Mary, the third participant, was a current eighth grade English teacher in a suburban middle school. At the time of the interview, she had 12 years teaching experience in public schools. For eight of those years, Mary had been teaching eighth grade English in her current position. In addition to her teaching duties, Mary served as the team leader for eighth grade teachers in her school and helped to run the school's chapter of the Oklahoma Education Association. Her active involvement in the school community made her a great candidate for my research.

The last participant, Jamie, was my former social studies teacher. At the time of our interview, she held a position teaching high school government classes. However, 14 of her 15 years of experience were spent as an eighth grade United States History teacher in the same suburban district. Jamie was asked to participate because of my memory of her as an active, passionate teacher who loved her job, but also because of

her reputation for being especially helpful as a mentor teacher to student interns in her classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

According to Merriam (2009), interviewing is the best method of data collection "when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 88). Because my research focused primarily on my participants' perceptions and past experiences, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were utilized in obtaining data. I chose a semi-structured interview protocol for several reasons. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to be "guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored" and left room to "respond to the situation at hand...and to new ideas on the topic" as the participants explored their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). I felt this type of approach was in keeping with the phenomenological slant of my research question, as a semi-structured interview was likely to elicit "the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 92). I also believed a more casual, conversation-style interview would help my participants to feel more comfortable and thus contribute richer, more authentic responses.

I created an interview protocol to guide me through the interview process (Appendix A). I started with basic questions about the participants' teaching experiences, but the majority of my questions were open-ended, hoping to "yield descriptive data, even stories about" their teaching experiences and philosophies (Merriam, 2009, pp. 96-99). As the interviews progressed, I made use of probes and follow-up questions as needed. In general, I followed the order of the questions as they were outlined in the guide. However, I deviated from the order if a participant's train of

thought skipped to another question, or if we needed to circle back to a question that had already been asked. Additionally, the semi-structured nature of the interview process allowed me to make adjustments as more data were revealed throughout the study.

For example, in the midst of the interview process, I decided to reverse the order of two questions to see if it changed participant responses. In the first two interviews, I asked about the participants' philosophies on the purpose of education before asking about activities or lessons that they implemented in their classrooms. This allowed them to reflect on their philosophies before they told personal stories about their classrooms. With the second two interviews, I reversed this approach; I asked about their typical classroom activities on days where they felt the most joy before asking about the purpose of education. I wanted to see if the participants' personal stories, lessons, and activities fit with what they described as their philosophies, regardless of the question order.

All interviews were audio-recorded so I could focus more on the conversation than writing down notes. The audio-recordings were then transcribed for coding and analysis and stored securely and separately from the completed transcriptions. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity that were attached to their transcribed interviews, and all identifying information in the transcription was modified. I used a constant comparative method of data analysis consistent with grounded theory research (Merriam, 2009, p. 199). As suggested by Merriam (2009), I began by open coding, perusing my transcriptions for all data that might be relevant to my research

question before moving on to “axial coding” and “selective coding” to refine my categories of data and determine findings for my study (Merriam, 2009, p. 200).

Trustworthiness

The point of my study, like most qualitative studies, was not to determine a “correct” or singular “Truth” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210). Rather, the purpose was to generate a more detailed understanding of how teachers manage to function within the education system while simultaneously working to transform it. Because qualitative research focuses more on “understanding” than quantifying experiences, perspectives, and relationships, qualitative studies are often met with concerns about “credibility” and “validity” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 212-213). I used several strategies to address these concerns, including respondent validation and reflexivity (Merriam, 2009).

The constant-comparative method used to analyze data ensured that I was cross-checking the data across all interviews (Merriam, 2009, pp. 216-217). As the interviews progressed, I checked with respondents to make sure I was not misunderstanding or misinterpreting their meanings. Finally, it was important that I use reflexivity to critically reflect on my own “biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

From the outset, I have recognized and admitted my personal interest in the research problem. I am a 27-year-old female social studies teacher in her fourth year of teaching middle school United States History. As mentioned in the introduction, and throughout the research, I have felt the pressure of the public education system and the demands of the teaching career first-hand. I have coped with and continue to cope with occasional feelings of confusion, disillusionment, and cynicism over my role in the

system. I, like many teachers, believe that the role of public education is to provide *all* students with the skills and tools necessary to live happy, meaningful lives within a free, democratic community and to recognize their abilities and responsibilities to contribute to their communities in ways that bring about positive change. However, in my first few years of teaching, I felt that those goals were being put on the "backburner" in favor of test results, efficiency and a desire to avoid controversy. It appeared to me as if things had always been this way. If this was the case, could I have any hope that the situation could change? Would I be able to change it? Why was I teaching if I did not believe there was hope for the future? Teachers who entered the profession at the same time as me were struggling, too. Some of them left the classroom within a year or two. Why did anyone teach if the system was so hard to change?

I wanted to find some insight into how I could avoid my feelings of fatalism and become a survivor teacher. I did not want to simply survive, though; I wanted to survive *and* thrive. I wanted to remain within the public education system while also remaining hopeful in my ability to make school, my community, and the world more like the ideal versions I had envisioned at the outset of my career.

Paulo Freire (2000) and Maxine Greene (1988) both argue that in order to be truly free and to work toward liberation, people must be able to "name" their world. They need to be able to identify the conditions and contexts of their current situations in order to transform them. It follows, then, that teachers need to be able to name their current contexts and obstacles in order to move beyond them and look toward an education system that *could* be rather than the one that currently *is*. As the investigator

in this study, I recognized that I was approaching this research as a method of naming my world and helping other teachers to name theirs.

In addition to concerns over validity and credibility, qualitative research also faces questions over “transferability” because of its generally small sample sizes (Merriam, 2009, pp. 225-228). For example, my participants were all secondary public school teachers from the state of Oklahoma. More specifically, the majority of their experiences came from public schools in the suburbs of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. To combat concerns over generalizability and transferability, I utilized “thick” description of the context, participants, and their interviews so that others could determine for themselves whether the study was transferrable to their own contexts (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). However, because I was looking for insights to the research problem from my context as a secondary Oklahoma public educator, it made sense to explore the experiences of teachers within a similar context, as long as I was not making any claims of pure objectivity.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I use data from survivor teachers' interviews to provide insight into how these teachers were able to avoid burnout and fatalism in their careers while also working to transform the institutions that they worked within. How might teachers better balance their personal well-being and happiness while also meeting the demands of an institution that increasingly relies on test data, externally determined results, and externally determined accountability? As I analyzed the responses from the participants' interviews, four distinctive themes began to emerge. Despite having varied careers and distinct personalities, all of the participants seemed to have similar trends in the ways they approached their careers. These trends could provide insight for early careers teachers about how they might learn to survive and thrive within the public school system. While this chapter is organized thematically and will explore the meaning of each trend independently, all of these themes build on each other, melding together to allow the survivor teachers to function within the school system while also working toward their personal visions of education.

The first theme I will discuss is "Teaching Authentically," which has been subdivided into two smaller categories: "Developing a Philosophy" and "Implementing a Philosophy." From there, I will discuss the second theme, "Reconciling Personal and Institutional Tensions." Within this theme, I will explore several tensions that emerged throughout my study. Each of these will be discussed as subcategories. These categories will examine the survivor teachers' abilities to reconcile tensions between institutional standards and personal values, between personal expectations and the reality of failure, and between the "inside" and "outside" of the institution. The next major theme,

“Building Community” is discussed in two categories: “Finding and Developing Collaborative Relationships” and “Working in Community.” The last theme, “Nurturing Passion by Choosing Joy” will center on the ways in which the survivor teachers sustained personal satisfaction in their careers.

Teaching Authentically: Developing and Implementing a Philosophy of Education

The first theme that emerged was that the survivor teachers had authentic and personal goals, practices, and philosophies about education that they consciously worked toward. The teachers in my study articulated their visions for public education, but they also demonstrated that they reflected on those philosophies and implemented practices that would help achieve them. In this section, I will explore ways in which teaching authentically helped my participants survive and thrive within the public education system.

Developing a Philosophy. One way that the survivor teachers were able to teach authentically was by developing personal goals and ideas about the purposes of public education. Before teachers become either fatalistic about the “unchangeable” state of public education or work to transform it, it stands to reason that they would have an idea of how they think education should work and what their roles should be within the institution. All four participants were able to clearly identify their personal philosophies and goals regarding public education.

For example, Mary argued that “the purpose of public education is to equalize and democratize our society, so if you are born into poverty, no matter your race, ethnicity, background that you…produce a citizenry that...puts us all on an equal playing field.” Jamie claimed that public education should aim to “create citizens that

can think for themselves and articulate for themselves, and be able to participate in society...as a whole human." According to Michelle, public schools should provide students with "an equitable education, so that they can go out, find something that brings them joy, so that they can contribute to the community with their skills and talents," whether they choose to become "an academic or a welder." Paula explained that "we do this for an informed population and hopefully for a better future….and in the interest of improvement."

The teachers also outlined "ideal curricula" that would best serve their personal philosophies of education. Paula, for example, described her ideal curriculum as one:

> So loosely based on the idea of a curriculum as to be undistinguishable...I think, ideally—of course you want a shared topic...—but then…you have this general umbrella, an area that you are talking about, but the learners drive where you go and how you go and there are no time limits, constraints...You let the students prioritize what comes next and where you wanna go, and then the teacher serves more to facilitate and to help share back with the class and the broader community.

Current prescribed curriculum standards often focus on specific facts that must be covered, confining the scope of the academic conversation and limiting space for student exploration. In Paula's vision, the education system would provide a safe, open space for students to explore the world and its problems.

Similarly, Jaime stated that her ideal curriculum would involve more opportunities:

> To really pose broad questions to the kids…and have them try to come up with a possible solution to it. And what might be long-term effects…or even short-term effects? What are some positives/negatives of how to deal with this problem....You can pose these thematic problems, and be like "how would you solve this?" But then be like this is what they did to solve it. Now, what were the repercussions of how they solved it in the past?

Jamie felt that education should provide space for students to wrestle with the problems, or the "broad questions" of the real world. She saw her role as a facilitator of such discussions, encouraging students to evaluate decisions of the past and to pose solutions of their own. The ideas of these two teachers seemed to align with what Freire (2000) calls a "problem-posing education" (p. 79). Rather than choosing to look at students as places to deposit knowledge, these survivor teachers wanted students to have the responsibility of guiding their own academic discussions.

The other two teachers had similar desires to provide students with opportunities for input, but they also discussed the need to provide accessibility for students at a variety of levels. Michelle used her "Reading for Pleasure" elective as an example of an ideal curriculum. According to Michelle, the:

> Whole philosophical underpinning...was choice. Students would choose their own books...sometimes I would look up and there would be 32 different kids reading a different book—and engaged...and I one time had a student say to me… "I have never had a class that was so democratic"…They did their own differentiation...and, gosh, if education could be like that, meeting students where they are now, and then challenging them and responding…

While words like "differentiation" and "student choice" have become buzzwords in the current education system, my experience has been that the institution expects teachers to use these methods to produce data that verifies all students are meeting the prescribed academic standards. Michelle demonstrated that she valued a curriculum that allowed all students to be involved and invested in their education. She offered them choices so that she could "meet them" where they were and help them to enjoy the learning process—for the sake of enjoying the learning process.

Like Michelle, Mary said that her ideal curriculum would be based on student choice:

> Where we read mentor texts together—and those have to be really high interest, and…accessible for a large amount of students…And then quickly move on to extended works where it can relate back to the mentor text, and then the students can do more, but on their own. And just doing that all year: coming together, discussing…

Mary felt education should provide all students with opportunities to interact with and interpret the world they live in. To achieve this goal, she felt it would be best to develop a curriculum loosely bounded by "mentor" texts to provide general themes or questions for study, but that would ultimately allow students to choose and explore "extended works" that fit their own interests and skill levels.

Palmer (2007) argues that the ability to identify and work toward a personal philosophy makes for good teaching. According to Palmer (2007), "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). He defines identity as the "intersection of diverse forces that make up" a person's life, and integrity as "relating those forces in ways that bring...wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death" (Palmer, 2007, p. 14). His emphasis on identity and integrity is analogous to my participants' emphasis on "authenticity."

In order to maintain wholeness in teaching, good teachers should be open to exploring their identities and commit to teaching "each day in ways that honor their own deepest values rather than in ways that conform to the institutional norm" (Palmer, 2007, pp. 3, 177). In other words, the most effective teachers take the time to explore and know themselves and then use that knowledge to choose methods, strategies, and lessons that align with their personal values. This allows teachers to work toward

fulfilling their own visions of education rather than simply perpetuating the vision of the institution because "that is how it has always been."

Implementing a Philosophy. Another way survivor teachers managed to teach authentically was through engaging in ongoing reflection and living out their educational philosophies as creative practitioners. Throughout their interviews, it was evident that my participants did not merely have ideas about how the system should work; they also spent time evaluating the extent to which they were remaining authentic to their philosophies, goals, and identities. As classroom experiences arose, these teachers reflected on those experiences and then implemented curricula, lessons, and strategies to help themselves become more authentic educational practitioners.

It was interesting to find similarities in the survivor teachers' responses, despite their different experiences and subject areas. All four shared a common interest in education for enlightenment, personal fulfillment, and social improvement. Each participant described ideal scenarios in which their students were given more freedom to explore their worlds, and in which they, as teachers, were given more freedom to provide those opportunities to their students. However, the broader point is that each of these survivor teachers developed an authentic philosophy of their own. They were not mere technicians, reciting the party line of the institution or following the instructions of others (Giroux, 1985). Rather, these survivors were dedicated to developing philosophies that reflected their identities, values, and personal goals for the future of education.

Freire (2000) argues that dramatic change, or "revolution," is only achieved through praxis, which is "*reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be

transformed" (p. 126). He believes that, "apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human," because knowledge is generated only "through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72). Those who engage in thoughtful reflection and action in the world are less likely to "accept the passive role imposed on them" or to simply "adapt to the world as it is" because they are able to "develop the critical consciousness" necessary to see that they can be "transformers of that world" (Freire, 2000, p. 73). While Freire focused on the role of praxis in liberating the *student*, I would argue that praxis can be equally liberating for the *teacher*. The teachers I interviewed reflected on their philosophies and made choices in their careers that furthered their goals, allowing them to more authentically transform the system into what they believed it *could be*, rather than simply accepting it for what it *was*.

One way my participants implemented their philosophies was by creating lessons that fostered their visions for education. Scholars like Dewey (1938) and Stenhouse (1983) argue that educational reforms that deny the importance of teachers' judgments and experiences will continue to fail. Dewey (1938) explains that traditional schooling has made it the job of the teacher to "keep order." This absurdly excludes or sets teachers apart from the learning community (pp. 55, 58). To move toward a more liberating authentic education he calls for an emphasis on "educative experience," transforming teachers from "external boss[es]" to "leader[s] of group activities" in their classroom communities (Dewey, 1938, p. 59). Similarly, theorists like Stenhouse (1983) describe teaching as an art; like artists, teachers and learners can only develop their

skills if they are allowed some freedom and authority to make choices about their own practice (pp. 211-212).

The participants in my study constructed and reflected on their personal philosophies and made critical and creative choices in their curriculum and instruction that fostered meaningful learning experiences around those philosophies. Their descriptions of the lessons they designed suggested that they were living out their philosophies as creative practitioners, as artists, within their classrooms. These deliberate choices and creative influences in their own curriculum and instruction provide important insight into how teacher survivors avoid fatalism in their careers. As they described the lessons and relationships they created, each of my participants expressed heartfelt feelings of joy and personal satisfaction.

For example, Jamie, who valued sharing differing perspectives and "broad questions," designed lessons that provided context to the present through study of the past. For example, Jamie asked her government students to "research...different policies from the last 50 years,...debate each other on which one was better," and evaluate whether the policies were still relevant today. Jamie explained that she had loved teaching the eighth grade Civil War unit because "so many things with the Civil War are things we still talk about today...I can draw them forward: 'this is why we struggle or this is why we do things the way we do.'"

Michelle expressed the view that public education should be designed to help all students receive the individual instruction they needed to find joy and contribute to the community as a whole. To further this goal in her classroom, Michelle said the "big thing" with English was "in the choice of books." Rather than focusing on daily lessons

or activities, she would intentionally choose books that fit themes that were important to her. For example, she chose To Kill a Mockingbird, her "favorite book," to help teach students about "citizenship and courage." Michelle used the choice of books to foster discussions with her students that allowed her to put her vision of education into action.

Paula designed lessons that depended heavily on student participation, remaining authentic to her student-driven philosophy. One of her favorite lessons she created for her International Studies elective was a North Pole simulation where students had to wrestle with international competition over the North Pole and oil rights. Students "basically had to divvy up the North Pole, and some days I would just sit back and go, like, 'I have thirty juniors and some sophomores, some freshman even, arguing about geopolitics.'" By designing lessons like this, Paula enabled herself to put her philosophy of problem-posing education into action and to serve the facilitator role she envisioned.

Mary also created lessons aimed at putting her ideals into practice. She created lessons involving propaganda to help her students achieve her ideal of "reading the world." Through these, she helped students evaluate the messages that were continually sent to them through "writing and non-print text," including television commercials. As another example, Mary and her coworkers designed a Holocaust unit where all students read "Anne Frank" together, but then choose from a variety of historical fiction novels to address thematic issues of the Holocaust and humanity. Rather than pursuing the traditional route of forcing the whole class to read the exact same book, this unit allowed Mary to pursue her ideal curriculum based on mentor texts.

As further evidence of the praxis involved in becoming a survivor, my participants demonstrated an ability to identify where they were falling short of their visions. For example, Jamie admitted, "I think in some areas I am much more successful in that 'here's the broad picture, how/what's the best solution?'…but often times I have to get bogged down in 'I've got to move on, or get this covered.'" Here Jamie reflected on her practice and recognized she was putting her goals aside for the interests of the institution. To remedy this, she explained:

> If I realize I'm just not doing what I really want to do—then I'll just stop...and come up with some project that I need them to do in order to help them understand and [to] be the teacher I want to be.

Instead of continuing to violate her sense of what was right, Jamie put her reflection into action. She identified what was wrong and took steps to implement her philosophy, making her practice more authentic to her vision and values.

Mary pointed out that she really enjoys lessons "where you have read something together and the kids have to…debate with each other...I don't do it often enough, and I really want to try to work that in more." Mary identified an area where she was feeling an inconsistency between her vision and her practice. Rather than stopping, she added that she was going to try and "work that in more," suggesting that she planned to continue implementing her philosophy more authentically in the future.

By engaging in constant and consistent reflection, my participants were also able to avoid practices that were inauthentic. For example, when Jamie was struggling in her new high school position, she was able to identify that, while she loved her department, they were "worksheet types" who did not follow the "curriculum guide." It

would have been easier to simply follow their lead, but she decided that their style would not work.

As we discussed the importance of social studies, Paula blamed "bad history instruction" for students' apparent lack of love for history. She explained that some "old school teachers think it's just this litany of facts," leaving out the "skill aspect of it." To rectify this, she tried to focus on the "skills of *doing* history" in her classroom. Paula perceived traditional history curriculum as "bad" and inauthentic to her vision. Instead of conforming to the mold, she took action in her classroom to address the problem. In so doing, she implemented her own philosophy of social studies education.

Sometimes as teachers we experience moments where well-meaning friends and co-workers give advice meant to help them survive the system. However, if we are not careful, we run the risk of violating our selfhood by acting in ways that are inauthentic. For example, as Michelle transitioned into her role in a new high school, a teacher friend advised her to change her style, claiming that "'this touchy feely, hippy thing' is not gonna work." She told Michelle she would need "to beat the hubris out of" the students. According to Michelle, her friend was a good teacher, but:

> She was just more brusque, less personal. And it worked for her. But I wasn't going to try that—with sarcasm and jokes. That would have been a disaster. I had to use what I had.

Michelle shared another story in which a principal advised her to "move on to someone else" if, after "about two weeks," a student did not start caring about his or her grade. She responded the only way she knew how:

> I didn't change who I was to fit particular kids, but I did tell them I wasn't going to give up on 'em. I try not to have a persona, but I am just going to be that

> goofy, hippy teacher that keeps loving you even when you are being a brat to her.

In both of these stories, Michelle demonstrated her commitment to living out her own philosophy and values. She reflected on the advice she received and chose to act only in ways that were consistent with her identity.

By reflecting on their own philosophies, the survivor teachers I studied were able to use their experiences to identify and avoid strategies, interactions, and influences that would violate their senses of "self." These reflections also allowed them to focus their energies on implementing their philosophies of education by putting their values into action. Importantly, my participants never described their successes as complete or their plans as finished. I was left with the impression that praxis—reflection and action—was an ongoing process for these teachers.

Palmer (2007) argues that when a teacher's "identity and integrity are diminished," they more easily burn out and "lose the heart to teach" (p. 17). Paula mirrored this sentiment, lamenting that she and her peers sometimes "felt like a hamster on a wheel, and that's where teachers get burned out…because you really start to resent that, you know? Why can't I be trusted to teach? Why do you have to be so prescriptive about every week and every day that I am teaching?" In our efforts to survive and thrive within the public school system, early career teachers can benefit from survivor teachers' examples. My participants managed to keep their "heart" for teaching and avoid fatalism by developing authentic philosophies of education, reflecting upon those philosophies, and implementing strategies to put them into practice.

Reconciling Personal and Institutional Tensions

Teaching authentically allowed the survivor teachers I studied to develop personal goals and pursue opportunities to transform their institutions into ones that better served their ideas of what they *should* be. However, in seeking to be transformative, the teachers also had to be realistic. Though they found issues within the system, they still needed to exist within it. My participants' stories suggested they wanted things to change but also felt they needed to "play the game" in order to keep their jobs. When confronted with obstacles, it seemed these survivors struggled with, but ultimately resisted, the pressures to be bound by binary or "all-or-nothing" thinking. This suggested another essential component, or theme, to surviving and thriving in public education. My participants needed to find ways to reconcile the tensions between their personal goals and the constraints of the institution.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2007) describes the modern world's tendency to deduce life "into an endless series of *either-or*s;" things are either "this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white" (p. 64). According to Palmer (2007), the remedy for this desire to "think the world apart" is to learn to embrace life "as *both-and*" (p. 65). He encourages teachers to think the world "together again" by recognizing that truth is often found in "paradox" (Palmer, 2000, p. 65). Maxine Greene echoes Palmer's argument, claiming that there is "a dialectical relation marking every human situation...between two different, apparently opposite poles" (1988, p. 8). "Good teachers," Palmer explains, "always find ways" to hold these paradoxes, "the tension of opposites," without seeking to immediately resolve them; they are able to live within

the contradictions (2000, p. 76-89). As I conducted my interviews, I found that my participants were doing just that.

The teachers I studied were able to recognize and articulate the realities that confined them within the institution while also finding ways to follow the rules without sacrificing their desire to work for change in the public education system. They demonstrated patience in dealing with obstacles without using those obstacles as excuses to abandon or become complacent in pursuing their personal goals and transformative efforts. These teachers were able to reconcile and hold the tensions created between their personal philosophies and the larger institution. In this section I will explore ways my participants were able to navigate this tension in various capacities: between personal values and institutional standards, between expectations of success and realities of failure, and between the "inside" and "outside" of the institution.

Between Personal Values and Institutional Standards. One of the tensions facing teachers today involves pressures of students performing well on standardized tests. In Oklahoma, all public school teachers are provided with a set of codified, prescribed standards they are responsible for teaching. Every school and every teacher is held accountable to the testing culture to some degree, but some grade levels and subject areas are hit heavier than others. For example, up until the 2016-2017 school year, Oklahoma's eighth grade students were tested in every core subject: English, math, science, and social studies. This put tremendous pressure on the students as well as the teachers. In my experience, it sometimes feels like an all or nothing scenario

when it comes to what teachers should focus on in their curriculum. Either we focus on preparing our students for the tests, or we focus on our own philosophies and values.

Two of the survivors, Mary and Jamie, described their struggles with this issue at length, focusing on their attempts to balance their values with the demands of external accountability. Mary, a twelve year veteran, portrayed the testing culture as an obstacle to her practice, arguing that she is "able to do about 50%" of what she wants to do because she has to "spend so much time...preparing" for "that stupid...writing test." She explained that she tries her best to "work within the restrictions...but do other things, too." She labeled these "other things" as being "what is right." Although Mary stated she was "not always successful" at balancing the two, she said it has "always been the goal...to figure out a way" to do both. She hoped that "one day" she would "find the courage to just do everything" she knew was right, but right now she would "just hate…it if students came to" her and told her they felt unprepared for the test. For this reason, Mary continued to prepare her students for the tests the institution required. However, she did not use these tests as an excuse to entirely abandon her personal vision for her classroom.

Jamie pointed out that the tests at the end of her AP classes strained her ability to live out her philosophy in her classroom. Her thoughts are reflected in the following interaction:

> Jamie: This past year with AP Gov—some of these kids are taking the test. Not *all* of them, but some of them—the majority of them, and I have to make sure they're prepared somewhat for that test. And so sometimes I don't get to focus on "here's the broad issue, here's this broad question," because I have to be like—
>
> Me: Here's the question "they" are going to ask you. [laughs]

> Jamie: Right. "Here…let's cover these things!" And I think that's kinda the downfall of accountability. I mean, yeah, we want to make sure they are learning, but now everyone thinks it should be the test….I mean it gives us "accountability" and that's great, but—
>
> Me: There's a detriment to it as well?
>
> Jamie: Right. There's always going to be a consequence, but how big is that consequence gonna be? And that's—finding that balance [trails off, pause]
>
> Me: How do you do both?
>
> Jamie: Right. How do you do both?

When asked how she dealt with this challenge to her philosophy, Jamie explained that she reminded herself "the test isn't everything" and tried to "not be so focused on the end result." She said if she realizes:

> I'm just not doing what I really want to do...then I'll just stop…And, sometimes, if we don't get through it, well, we don't get through it...I can't go through every Supreme Court case, and I can't go through every single policy, but if they get the tools to learn about those policies on their own, then I figure that's a win.

Like Mary, Jamie prepared her students for the tests, satisfying the institutional demand for quantifiable results, but she did not use the pressures of accountability as an excuse to entirely lose her values and sense of self. These two teachers recognized that they did not have to confine themselves to an all or nothing dynamic. Instead, they chose to find ways to reconcile the tensions between their own beliefs and the institution's values.

Between Personal Expectations and the Reality of Failure. The survivor teachers in this study also demonstrated their ability to reconcile the tensions between their goals and the constraints of the institution by explaining how they balanced their expectations of success with the realities of failure. Sometimes, as teachers, we can be our own worst enemies. We often enter the profession with high expectations of what we want to accomplish and what we should be able to do. When beginning teachers are

forced to confront school environments that do not match our expectations the results can be crippling. Speaking from personal experience, the weight of responsibilities and feelings of inadequacy can plague the early days of our careers. During my first year in the classroom, I spent most of my evenings in tears until approximately Thanksgiving Break. I felt as if I was barely keeping my head above water, and I knew that everyone—my principals, my students, my co-workers—knew I was unqualified for the job. I repeatedly told my husband that I had made a mistake, that I could not do it. I wondered aloud: how does anyone do it? How does any teacher survive for decades in a career that forces them to be so vulnerable, and still enjoy it? The stories my participants shared provide some insight for myself and other early career teachers.

While they readily admitted and recognized their failures, these survivors did not appear to fear or dwell on them. Instead, they demonstrated a willingness to forgive themselves when they fell short of their personal expectations, freeing themselves to move forward and work for improvement. In other words, they were able to maintain high standards without becoming immobilized by them. For example, when Jamie explained the challenges of an overwhelming workload, she advised that teachers need to realize:

> It's okay if your papers sit there for like two weeks…and don't get graded. Or it's okay to be like, I just had them write this essay—it's okay if I just look at their thesis and topic sentences to see if they have...tied them all together. You know, maybe you don't grade as in-depth as you planned, but what is something you can assess out of it to ensure that they are getting it?

Jamie argued that it was okay to get overwhelmed or for things to go differently than planned. In fact, the bureaucratic side of teaching within public schools seems to *ensure* that failure will happen. Sometimes it feels as if there will always be another form to fill

out, permission slip to give to students, or data evaluation to turn in. However, Jamie's response suggested that teachers should focus on the things they *can* accomplish, rather than beating themselves up about the tasks that remain uncompleted.

Jamie's experience teaching a new subject in high school reminded her how it felt to be overwhelmed in unfamiliar territory. She felt she did not know the material very well and was "learning it...two days before the kids." She also recognized that "developing the kinds of lessons" she really wanted to have was "going to be a struggle...because of time." To cope in these moments, Jamie explained that she tried to focus on "building a foundation first and understanding that 'it's okay'" that she was not where she wanted to be because she knew she was eventually "going to get there." She recalled that in her 14 years teaching eighth grade American History "*nothing* was ever exactly the same" because she started by building a foundation. Jamie was okay with her foundation but continuously sought to make it "better...one step at a time," tweaking things and modifying every year. She was able to forgive her failures without using them as excuses to be satisfied with merely being "good enough." Jamie continued to work toward her goals even when she fell short of her own expectations.

Mary and Michelle described similar feelings when reflecting on their relationships with students over the years. Mary discussed the difficulty of "those rare instances where you see or hear bad things that your students have done to hurt themselves, or others." In those instances:

> You would have hoped that your students would have left your classroom with a little better character...you have to stop and realize that, just like you can't take *all* the credit when they graduate and are doing good things and contributing to society, you also can't take all the blame when something bad happens or when they falter.

Mary argued that teachers need to forgive themselves for these moments because, "as a teacher, if you took on the worry of all those kids every year…I think *that* would burn you out." While it can be difficult to move past perceived failures, Mary said teachers should "become almost like doctors in some ways" and "compartmentalize...so that you are not in the sort of...constant worry cycle about the kids in your class." After all, "summer comes...and then you have this whole new set of kids...to work on." Mary seemed to suggest if teachers dwelled too much on their failures with previous students, it might inhibit their ability to move forward and be successful with future students.

When asked about obstacles to her success, Michelle responded similarly:

> I always tell young teachers, every kid's a story. Sometimes they will let you into their story, sometimes they won't. They have burdens. They can't "do school" and they lash out at me because I represent school. They are just surviving....And, you know, I can't reach every kid. That doesn't mean I wasn't going to try. You know like the starfish story? Throw that one back—[trails off] there are certain things that are beyond our control, but you know, if those guys have one positive memory of me, then "yay!"

Through her story, Michelle demonstrated an ability to forgive herself. She was able to forgive herself for failing to reach every student by acknowledging that certain things were beyond her control. However, she did not allow that to stop her from trying to "reach every kid." The starfish story Michelle alluded to reinforces her message.

In one version of the story, a puzzled man questions a young boy who is walking along the beach, throwing starfish into the ocean. The boy explains that, if he does not throw them in the ocean, the starfish will die in the sun. Incredulous, the man responds that the beach stretches for miles and there are millions of starfish. He claims the boy's efforts are meaningless because his actions are not going to make a difference. The boy listens, but throws another starfish in the water, claiming simply, "it made a

difference to that one." Rather than becoming immobilized by the prospect of failing to help every student, Michelle chose to forgive herself for her failures while still recognizing the value of helping those she could, holding herself accountable to the high standard of *trying* to reach every student. Paired with examples from the other participants, Michelle's comments suggested that one way survivor teachers are able to reconcile the tensions between their goals and the institution is by allowing themselves to exist in the paradox between their personal expectations and the realities of failure.

Between the "Inside" and the "Outside." Maxine Greene (1988) asserts that people adopt an attitude of fatalism when they "cannot name alternatives" or "imagine a better state of things" (p. 9). In this state, people are "likely to remain anchored or submerged" in the system, entrenching themselves within the institution (Greene, 1988, p. 9). This type of burnout transforms educators into "cogs in the machine" who simply perpetuate the system for the institution's sake because they do not have the energy or imagination to work toward better alternatives. However, fatalism can also lead people to rush to another extreme. Greene (1988) describes these people as free-floaters, because they "uproot themselves" and abandon the system entirely (p. 9). While they are outside of and "free" from the institution, their "freedom is a void" (Greene, 1988, pp. 9-10). Educators who burn out and choose to free themselves by leaving the profession entirely also sacrifice their ability to transform the system from within.

During my interviews, it became clear that survivor teachers have another way of reconciling the tensions between their personal goals and the constraints of the institution. The teachers in my study were able to exist comfortably within the paradox between the inside of the institution and the outside world. They did not feel the need to

be either fully in or fully out of the system. All four teachers played an active role in their respective institutions, but none of them gave the impression that they were submerged, or entrenched, within them. My participants found ways to function within the education system while simultaneously working to change that system to look more like the one they envisioned.

Sometimes the rules of the institution do not coincide with a teacher's philosophy. As a beginning teacher, I have felt this tension. When these situations arise, teachers may feel pressure to conform and to be a "team player." How do survivor teachers approach these situations? Paula shared a story about one such predicament. She explained, "there were times when I got in trouble...for…'teaching the controversy,' so I would try to phrase it in a way that gave me an out." Paula did not use the threat of getting in trouble as an excuse to shy away from teaching the controversy. She continued to teach controversial topics in ways that kept her safe within the confines of the institution. For example, one lesson in her International Studies class focused on conflict minerals. As students explored the topic, they drew connections between the demand for cell phones (including a particular mineral used in cell phone production) and sexual assault. The students wanted to create posters to inform their peers of these connections, and Paula let them. However, the principal quickly found her and informed her that the posters must come down. While she complied with the principal's request, Paula did not let the conversation stop there. She followed the rules, but used the situation as an authentic teaching opportunity that allowed students to question the system:

> So, then the next day we had to have a talk. The kids were like, "why did they take our posters down?" and we had to talk about how some people don't like their world bothered by these things—it's like taking the blue pill in the Matrix. Like, you can't go back. So we had this conversation about paradigm shifts...

Although Paula worked within the system as a teacher in a public school classroom, she showed her students that she was not unwaveringly loyal to it. Through her example, Paula taught her students that it should not be taboo to question the decisions of the institution.

On most days, though, teachers' visions will not be challenged in dramatic face-offs with the administration. One of the biggest challenges facing teachers is navigating the "space" within the institution. Teachers' schedules are heavily regimented; there are only so many hours in a day and only so many minutes in a class period. On top of the time constraints, there are also required standards that teachers must cover, parent and student emails that must be answered, and legal obligations that must be met, such as required trainings or Individualized Education Program (IEP) accommodations. With all of these required constraints on time and curriculum, how can teachers find the time or space to work toward their personal educational goals?

In a similar study, Brewer (2013) found that teachers interested in teaching multicultural citizenship "created space" in the curriculum for relevant lessons, despite the demands of the accountability movement (pp. 32-34). Likewise, the survivor teachers in this study were able to carve their own spaces, making room for discussions, activities, and ideas that were important to their philosophies without shirking the duties of the system that "signed" their paychecks. This carving of space allowed my

participants to remain *in* the institution while also bringing in their values from the *outside*.

One way my participants were able to carve space for their own interests and philosophies was by weaving things into the institution's prescribed curriculum. For example, Michelle chose themes for the year. When she taught To Kill a Mockingbird and Julius Caesar, she "had the theme for that whole year as 'idealism' and kind of wove that through and talked about the role of idealism in society." Mary explained that, although the literature she taught was handed down to her, she used it to help "students figure out how to be functional in society," an idea she felt was central to the purposes of education. She found ways to weave in thematic questions, such as "what do you do in the face of adversity?" to scaffold her students into learning how to make "their own decisions." Mary used the novel, The Outsiders, to present students with questions like:

> You are left alone without your parents, what do you do with your life? Do you run wild...become lawless? Or do you start to parent yourself and…your friends? What lessons can you take from that?

Both Michelle and Mary found ways to create room in the prescribed curriculum for their own philosophies and values.

Jamie also wanted to make space for things that her students found particularly relevant and useful, which was in-line with her philosophy that "public ed is meant to create citizens that...are able to participate in society." When her seniors requested that she help them go over the material they did not remember from Personal Financial Literacy (a class taken as freshmen), Jamie responded by creating "Financial Fridays" to ensure they could fit it in somewhere in the curriculum. Like the other survivors,

Jamie acknowledged that her time and curriculum were constrained by the institution. She also demonstrated a similar commitment to finding ways to weave in ideas or topics that were outside those constraints.

Another way my participants reconciled the tensions between the inside and outside of the institution was to carve entirely new and unique spaces for themselves within the school system. Interestingly, all four survivors proposed and received approval to teach self-designed elective classes. Because these classes were entirely their own, my participants were able to create spaces within their institutions in which they could experience increased levels of freedom. Paula's elective, International Studies, was not a tested subject, so she said the administration would essentially let her "get away with murder," as long as the kids were behaving. She claimed "there was hardcore teaching going on, but there was no accountability or oversight" other than her own internal accountability to the students. Because of this, Paula had the freedom to implement a more student-driven curriculum and abandon more traditional assessment approaches. She organized her class:

> Kind of like a current events class in reverse. We would start with contemporary issues and then work our way back to their roots. We organized it around "globalization," "development," "peace and conflict." Those were our big three units...The first semester I taught it, I realized there was not test, which meant *I* didn't have to give tests. We did a lot of simulations...we watched films. We did a lot of film study, documentaries and things on current issues. And the final was a huge two-week Model UN where they had to adopt a country and then use the issues we had studied and kind of dramatize them in the lecture center...it was like playing. It was so much fun.

While Paula was very much a participant within the institution, she created an entirely new space where she could operate outside many of its traditional structures.

Like Paula, Michelle also designed and piloted an elective, Reading for Pleasure. Her class meshed with her desire to provide every student with "an equitable education" and to find ways to "give kids heart." Students came to class with a book of their choice, or sometimes she would help them find one. Michelle stated that she had 2000 books in her room to assist with these choices. She had students "write about what they were reading" and then she would respond. She eventually worked herself into a position where she taught this elective full-time, recalling:

> One of my kids...said, "So…you found a way to get them to pay you to read?" And really, what I did was I got them to pay me to *sit* with readers. Those were probably the most profound moments of my career—just being with kids and giving them some choices and power in their own education.

Like Jamie and Paula, Michelle succeeded in creating space *inside* the institution where she had the freedom to work *outside* its typical day-to-day constraints.

To serve her philosophy of creativity in the classroom, Mary designed Creative Writing. Once approved, this elective allowed her students to participate in "long-term writing activities that I never had time to do in English or that maybe I had learned about in workshops." Mary also practiced writing *with* her students and used methods "based on student interest." While she and her students got a lot done, the pressure was off because there was no test at the end. She loved teaching the class because she liked "seeing their creative potential be unlocked and grow" and "seeing how individual differences in each student...play[ed] out in their creative expressions." She also realized that "some students who were really quiet in English class were *so* witty and observant and very willing to share in the safer, smaller environment of the CW class."

Teaching Creative Writing provided Mary and her students the freedom within the institution to work outside the typical function of the public school classroom.

Finally, like the others, Jamie also created a new class. Jamie turned her passion for current events into a proposal for Current Events, an elective taught at the junior high. She said "it was exciting and overwhelming to create a curriculum from scratch" as she set out to determine an ultimate goal for her class. The course was approved as a seventh grade elective, so she decided she would "help connect current events to what the students had learned in 6th grade geography and what they were learning in 7th grade geography." This echoed her belief that a teacher's job is to help build relevance between class content and students' lives. Jamie "loved teaching the class and was so happy" to receive "emails from parents" describing "the types of conversations they were starting to have with their children (like politics, and Russian aggression, and not be[ing] afraid of Ebola)." For Jamie, her elective provided opportunities for her students to make connections between the traditional curriculum and the outside world within the confines of the school day.

By creating space for themselves within the school system, the survivors I studied were able to avoid choosing between their own interests and the demands of the institution; they were able to exist in the tension between. Their commitment to navigating the spaces between the inside and the outside of the institution allowed them to reconcile the tensions between their personal goals and the constraints of the institution. These survivors' stories and experiences about the paradoxes inherent in public education could provide early career teachers with some insight on how to achieve greater joy and satisfaction while avoiding burnout and fatalism.

Building Community

While teaching authentically and reconciling tensions between personal goals and institutional constraints were important factors in their success, my participants' responses also revealed another key theme. During our interviews, these survivors also stressed the importance of building communities. To survive and thrive within the public school system, they seemed to believe teachers need to find and develop collaborative relationships and to work in community with others.

Both Parker Palmer and Paulo Freire discuss the importance of similar themes. Palmer (2007) argues that teachers should seek and develop "communities of congruence" (p. 178). Palmer posits that deciding to live "an undivided" or authentic life is "powerful," but such a life is "at first a frail reed" (p. 178). The decision to live and teach authentically may cause teachers to feel "anxiety and self-doubt." However, seeking out "communities of congruence" can provide "mutual reassurance" that pursuing "integrity is always sane" and can help "develop the language that can represent the...vision" and give it "the strength it will need to survive and thrive" (Palmer, 2007, p. 179). Although community is "vital in educational reform," teachers often do little to solve their isolation; Palmer argues "the lost will never be found until they send up a flare," taking action to find like-minded others (2007, p. 181). Similarly, Freire (2000) stresses the role of "cooperation" in overcoming oppressive systems. In his "dialogical theory of action, Subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world," and "cooperation can only be achieved through communication" (Freire, 2000, p. 167).

The teachers I interviewed suggested that finding and developing collaborative relationships contributed to the success of their careers because they were able to work within those communities to achieve their goals. Some participants talked about curriculum collaboration with peers while others discussed the importance of involving outside entities, such as community organizations or the legislature. The specific suggestions, examples, and experiences of the participants may have been different; however, all followed a common thread: building community was important to surviving—and thriving—as teachers in public education.

Finding and Developing Collaborative Relationships. To build communities that would help navigate the difficulties of teaching, survivor teachers had to be willing to seek out and collaborate with others. Jamie said "teachers...don't want to admit that" they struggle even though they want their "kids to admit when they struggle." While acknowledging the difficulties of revealing personal struggles, Jamie advised teachers to reach out for help. She argued that teachers should seek out more than just their "mentor or...department head," including administrators and "people in other departments." Jamie explained she "had to seek other people" in her new position as a high school government teacher. She went to her administrator and admitted that her AP government course was "swallowing" her, and her administrator connected her with people that could point her in the right direction. Jamie worked to find and develop relationships that could help her to improve her practice and accomplish her goals.

Like Jamie, Mary suggested that young teachers "ask for help...ask again and again and again" and "find someone in the building who is like-minded." She explained

that her “great colleagues” helped her live out her philosophy in her classroom. These colleagues provided inspiration and she looked to them for collaboration:

> Trying to collaborate is key. About “how do we make this work? How do we make this what we want to do? And make it relevant to class and students, while we prepare them for the standardized tests...I have a really good coordinator in the district—who when you feel like “I really can’t do it, these tests we have to give,” well she helps us find a way to help us do what we think is right. And try to work within those restrictions at the same time.

By finding and developing relationships with her colleagues, Mary was able to build a community to help her work toward her vision of education.

In these examples, my participants had people ready and available to help. However, what if teachers struggle to find like-minded teachers or to develop a community? Some of the teachers described moments in their careers where community building opportunities were harder to come by. In these instances, they found other ways to develop and build communities. Paula, for example, used her experience in her school to sit in on interviews for “potential social studies teachers.” She provided feedback to her principal and created a “cool little community [of] thoughtful, critical social studies teachers [that] helped minimize the hurdles” she felt hindered her ability to teach authentically.

At a particularly difficult time in her career, Mary was forced to look outside the institution to find and develop the relationships she desired:

> There was no one else in the building who was like-minded, so I joined an outside organization. And it was Oklahoma Writing Project...Ultimately, I figured out, I should leave that school. I knew there were better teachers out there, who were on the same wavelength as me….That I wasn’t alone! If you are feeling kind of stuck in your building, if you feel like you can’t find that one person—try to reach out online. Because that’s kind of what it was for me. I don’t think I would have heard of OWP if I wasn’t involved in—at the time they

> were called "listservs"—email lists…kinda helped lead me to it. And I think graduate school helped too.

When Mary felt isolated and struggled to build a community within her school building, she went outside of her school to find and develop relationships that could help her accomplish her goals.

The stories shared in the participants' interviews suggested that finding and developing collaborative relationships was essential to sustaining the energy needed to teach authentically and survive the tensions of the institution. In instances where those opportunities were more elusive, these survivors sought ways to build collaborative communities for themselves.

Working in Community. The survivor teachers in this study found and developed collaborative relationships with their peers, but some of them explained an added benefit to building community. Some saw these communities as avenues to work for change in their environment. For Paula, the "cluster of thoughtful, critical social studies teachers" she helped build in her school were allies with whom she could resist the pressures and injustices of the institution. When her district instituted mandatory benchmarking, she and her peers were upset about this test:

> We were like "this defeats the whole point!" We are giving tests over things we haven't taught yet, because the calendar is so out of whack. And they were literally making the benchmarks, not with a test generator, but with New York Regents tests. With sciss-ors. Tap-ing them! [emphasizing syllables] Right? This is crazy, we have the internet! Why are we cutting?! It was just nuts, the whole process. Everyone was mad about going to the meeting to make them, then the meeting was very contentious, and then the tests themselves weren't valid. And so…our whole department, even the coaches [chuckles], came to the meeting because they were up in arms about it. I guess the other schools were like "yeah we will give them, whatever." [pause] So we sent a letter to our coordinator, our principals, assistant superintendent, which went to the superintendent, that we were concerned about these benchmarks. We had the best scores on the social

> studies test in the district, but nobody was coming to us and asking, "what do you do, what is your calendar like," you know? They were like imposing these solutions for problems that weren't there. And so we said all that in the letter. And we had an assistant superintendent at the time that was responsive and supportive of that, that kind of fostered it. So, we were like, "Let's go for it," and I was the leader...we had two kind of high level meetings with the whole department and the superintendents where they came over to hear our grievances, which was kind of interesting, because I didn't think any of that would happen.

Ultimately, Paula and her colleagues were forced to give the benchmarks. However, these teachers worked to find ways to follow the rules without compromising their values. They gave the benchmarks as requested, but did not allow the benchmarks to take precedence over their instructional time with their students.

Before she retired, Michelle began a blog that focused on advocating for educators and education issues, particularly those in Oklahoma. When she started she felt like she was "a voice in the wilderness," but "not anymore." Although she retired from the public school classroom, Michelle is still actively involved with the legislature and in the blogging community on issues of public education, and others are joining in through Twitter, Facebook and other social media. Michelle argued that teachers should be advocates, but she insists that the problems of the system can only "be broken by parents." She explained that "when teachers speak truth, we are called 'whiners,' but it's a lot harder to say that to a parent." For this reason, Michelle said she would like to "work with [parents] and help them believe they have a voice" so they can learn "how to be advocates for their kids."

Paula stated that "social media is helping" make it easier to build and mobilize community. According to her, during "the last two years Oklahoma City has proven" social media works "with the election of the new superintendent, with all the blogs and

the twitter feeds...that helped turn people out at the rally." With these emerging technologies, she argued, it is easier for teachers and citizens to be "much more informed" on the issues and to access like-minded communities.

Throughout the interview process, my participants consistently advised that new teachers avoid isolation and work to build community. These perspectives support the literature, suggesting that community is needed to sustain the energy it takes to stay hopeful and authentic within the institution and to create lasting and meaningful change beyond one's own classroom.

Nurturing Passion by Choosing Joy

In the throes of testing season or in the midst of reading insulting parent emails, it is easy for teachers to question their career choices. Questions and doubts have clouded my mind as I received yet another GoogleDoc notification to collect yet another set of student data. On a number of occasions I have wallowed in self-pity, dramatically laying my head down on crossed arms next to my keyboard after opening the latest "IMPORTANT: Please read" email, abandoning feverish attempts to sneak bites of lukewarm, microwaved ravioli between recess duty and helping students. From my experience, such frustration and despair can become all-consuming if we allow it to be. How do teachers manage to survive and thrive within this daily grind?

Here again, the teachers I interviewed provided valuable insight. Their responses suggested the existence of a fourth and final theme. In order to survive and thrive in public education, teachers need to nurture their natural passions by choosing to focus on their intrinsic love, passion, and motivation for teaching. All four participants described

the “joy,” “magic,” and “fun” of teaching, sharing stories about finding opportunities to focus on and actively pursue the joys and successes of classroom practice.

My participants habitually used words like “magic,” “fun,” “interest,” and “it was a blast” as they shared their classroom experiences with me. Their words communicated their natural passion and enthusiasm for their chosen subjects, their students, and their professions. For example, both Paula and Michelle described their respective subjects as their “first loves.” As these teachers described their subjects, their classrooms, and their favorite lessons, their excitement grew, their eyes brightened, their smiles increased. Paula went on to passionately defend her “first love,” social studies:

> It ranks kinda towards the bottom of [students’] favorite classes—it’s down there with math! And I’m like, really!? [laughs] It should be the most interesting one...We haven’t shown them how important it is, or how interesting it is, or how passionate it is, or how horrifying it is, like all that stuff wrapped up into one. There are few subjects that can deliver that, you know!

Her comments provided clear evidence that Paula was naturally passionate about her subject and wanted to share that love of learning history with her students.

Jamie explained that she felt she was able to be successful with her students because her “passion helped them connect just a little bit more.” She was willing to “look like a fool in front of them a little bit” even if “a lot of times it was a dog and pony show in front just…to get them to connect to the material.” Jamie said she would try a “silly song, or drawing, or whatever” and “a lot of times” she was successful “just because [she] enjoyed it and it rubbed off on them.” Her natural enthusiasm was contagious. Not only did she enjoy her time in the classroom, but so did her students.

This contributed to her ability to succeed in working toward her vision of education while also maintaining passion and joy for her subject.

Michelle and Mary also described their love and passion for their jobs. Michelle said she was especially proud that "there were only a handful of days" where she felt like she did not "want to go to school...I was eager to go to school." When asked why she had not left the profession, Mary responded:

> Number one is I just really love coming to work. I hardly ever call in sick or don't come in. I think it helps that I found my niche here in this building. Like, today, when I came in, I was like, "I miss the kids already." It's weird to be here without the kids. I like to rest, I enjoy my free time, don't get me wrong, but I really enjoy what I do...I feel like if you are not having fun, you are not going to be good at it. So, that's number one for me—it still makes me feel good!

Although it was good to hear that these teachers loved their careers, this did not explain *how* they were able to maintain their passion and joy in the long-term. All four participants addressed moments of struggle in their careers. There were times when they felt challenged, stuck, frustrated, and overwhelmed. However, all of them remained actively involved with public education, and two of them are still happily teaching in public K-12 classrooms. The two teachers who were no longer in the classroom did not leave because of burnout. In fact, both had satisfying and fulfilling careers in the classroom. One retired after 39 years and continues to advocate for public education; the other became a teacher educator after 18 years of experience. How, then, did these four teachers manage to avoid the trap of fatalism, continue to work toward their personal goals, and sustain feelings of joy and passion over many years in the profession? Simply put, they nurtured their natural passions for the profession by choosing to focus on the joyful, successful moments in their careers.

Michelle and Mary both acknowledged the difficulties of dealing with uncertainty in their teaching careers. When asked to describe the extent to which they felt successful in achieving their visions of education, they hesitated to answer the question. Mary responded, “It’s hard to tell right away...there’s this famous quote about how you don’t really see the effects of what you do in the classroom, they are not fully realized until much later.” Michelle advised me that “the hardest lesson” I would ever “learn as a teacher” is that I will never be certain of the extent of my success.

However, both Mary and Michelle had the same suggestion for coping with that uncertainty. One way these two survivors nurtured their natural passions for teaching was through staying in contact with their students over time. Mary explained:

> Some of the students I kept in touch with over the years, I can see them making good decisions and contributing to society and it feels like something I did—and that all their teachers did—stuck along the way...and they are making it and they are out there doing what I had hoped they would do. I think it helps to stay in touch with students and see them grow up and become productive.

She added that when she has the opportunity to “talk to kids or see them on Facebook,” it gives her a “good feeling.” She made it a habit to go to graduation at the high school every year so she could watch her former students walk across the stage. When she sees her students, Mary told me she feels “genuine joy...even though it’s just a piece of paper.” By reaching out to former students, Mary created opportunities to nurture her natural passion and remember the joys of teaching.

Michelle echoed Mary’s sentiments. She explained that “because of social media” I would have a “better chance” than she, as she had a better chance than her father, to determine whether we had achieved our goals. She shared stories about reconnecting with students over Harry Potter through a blog post and helping former

students register to vote via Facebook. She also shared a story about running into a difficult student years down the road:

> I had this student who fought me constantly, but then I ran into him at Van's Pig Stand and he came up to me and said, "oh, I am doing so much better, you would be so proud of me."

For Michelle, this story was evidence that "we just don't know" the impact we have as teachers until years later. While lack of instant feedback can be disheartening, Michelle was able to nurture her passion for teaching by keeping contact with students. This helped her to remember the joys of impacting students' lives.

For another survivor, testing accountability was a major obstacle to maintaining her passion and joy for teaching. Jamie discussed the difficulties of becoming weighed down by the testing culture of public schooling. To combat these difficulties, she nurtured her natural passion by reminding herself that "the test isn't everything; the test is a snapshot of one day." Jamie tried to focus on the importance of her students "understanding, and then learning, and then expanding their horizons." Sometimes, she laughingly explained, this was "as simple as [posting a] note that says 'the test isn't everything'" and staring at it until she could refocus her attention on why she was truly there. By choosing to focus on the positive aspects of her profession, Jamie has been able to maintain the passion she entered with.

Another obstacle to maintaining passion and joy for teaching is the societal perception of the teaching profession. Mary explained that being a teacher can be difficult, because:

> You're expected to not have a good time… [T]he life of the teacher is supposed to be really self-sacrificial. And you do sacrifice as far as income, compared to your friends...[Y]ou will see your friends surpass you, and that's hard. Because

> you are like, "We all went to school at the same time, and I'm actually serving the public!"

To fight such disappointment, Mary suggested that teachers should "learn to put down" some of their negative thoughts and "focus on the success" and benefits they do have. Mary herself struggled with these thoughts, but followed her own advice:

> I talk about this with my husband because he is in education also, in a different capacity, but we talk about, we know what we are giving up for our kids. I mean, we take lower pay as a couple…We are choosing this because we are called to it, but also…we want our kids to see that you are supposed to have fun in your job. You are supposed to enjoy what you do. And I think my kids will remember "Yeah, we were poor, we didn't have this, or we didn't have that," but their mom's life and dad's life was centered around their work and it had to do with helping kids and they enjoyed what they did. I wouldn't want to be like my father in law who hated his job and got out as soon as he could, you know?

Mary's words demonstrated her ability to work past some of the negative challenges and obstacles inherent to her career by choosing to focus on the positive aspects of teaching that drew her to the field in the first place.

Beyond the daily grind, teachers sometimes face traumatic experiences that threaten to rob their passion and joy. For example, Jamie shared an experience when she struggled to cope with a particularly painful event. The community she worked in was ravaged by an F5 tornado. Her junior high was hit while school day was in session. The school was damaged, and the trauma of the tornado took an emotional toll on Jamie, her students, and her fellow staff members. Soon after the event, a new administrator joined the school. Jamie felt this person was unsympathetic to the grieving process, expecting the staff to "just get over" the tornado. She described a "weight" that affected her every time she entered the building. As she contemplated seeking another career, another teaching opportunity opened up:

> I think that I realized that maybe what I needed was to change locations and not necessarily careers. And it's worked out for me. Now, if I still didn't like teaching after I changed, then that would be a wake-up call. And that might be it. Especially for a young teacher, it might just be that that place is not the right fit for them.

Here Jamie found an opportunity to nurture the original passion and joy she felt at the beginning of her career. She determined she was not unhappy in her career but was simply unhappy in the particular context in which she worked. She chose to continue her career, pursuing the joy of teaching in another context.

Paula and Michelle explained that making choices that brought them joy contributed to the longevity of their educational careers. Michelle said she was able to keep herself "entertained for 39 years" by using her "gifts" and what she "had." Paula found joy in "flying under the radar with some of the more controversial things" and building simulation activities and games that kept her classes "fun" and "compelling." She stated those were the things that kept her "invested for 18 years" and made her "want to keep coming back." Though she is not as far into her career as Paula and Michelle, Mary advised young teachers to remember that "you can't do it all, you can't fight every single battle," but that if "something…is not making you happy, [you should] try to find ways to solve it. One little thing at a time."

Although I chose to focus last on the theme of nurturing passion by choosing joy, it is important to reiterate that all four themes are interrelated, working together to provide insight for early career teachers about how survive and thrive inside the public school system. Without nurturing their joys and natural passions for the teaching profession, survivor teachers would struggle to sustain the energy and desire they need to reconcile the tensions between their personal goals and institutional realities. This

would affect their ability to teach authentically in their classrooms. Without authentic, personal goals to work toward, how can teachers find the passion and motivation to build communities necessary to transform public education into their vision of what it should be? The survivor teachers in my study suggested that teaching authentically, reconciling tensions between personal goals and institutional constraints, building communities, and nurturing their natural passions were skills and sensibilities that helped them function within the formal educational institution while simultaneously working to transform that institution. My data suggests that if early career teachers like myself hope to survive and thrive in the public school system, we should seriously consider fostering similar skills and capacities.

Chapter 5: Implications

I began this study in an effort to help navigate my own feelings of frustration as a beginning teacher in the Oklahoma public school system. The process of conducting my research helped me to "name" some of the structures of the institution and to imagine how I might begin to change them. The insight that I received throughout the interview process has provided the hope I need to foster a longer, more productive, and more satisfying career. I was reminded of the need to know and "name" my "self" and to "use what I have" to teach authentically. The survivor teachers advised me to "choose my battles" and to navigate the spaces of tension between my goals and those of the institution. I feel less isolated and more empowered as my research and interactions with the participants linked me to resources and to other people that will help me to add to my community. Hearing the stories of survivor teachers allowed me to access the passion and love they still had for the profession. I could feel myself identifying with the joy they described which reminded me that I do truly love teaching.

The interview and writing processes forced me to intensely reflect on my own practice. The ideas and stories of these teachers helped me to think about ways I can be more authentic and transformative in my own classroom. I hope to use what I learned to inform my own practice, focusing on the habits and skills described in the study so that I might also become a survivor. Most of all, I was reminded that we are never really "finished"—as teachers or as people. My participants, all with considerably more experience than me, were *still* working to improve themselves and the institutions they worked within. It is easy to become discouraged as I struggle with the daily obstacles of the public school system, but the survivors' stories reinforce the idea of change as an

ongoing process. Through constant reflection and action, I can work to transform the structures of the system one day at a time.

While I began my research in pursuit of suggestions for my own practice, the results of this study have implications for other educators as well. Teachers can fall into fatalistic attitudes when we feel isolated in our careers and are unsure of how to move forward. I believe the insights provided through the survivor teachers' responses could help other teachers lay the groundwork to move past legitimate feelings of hopelessness and become reinvigorated in their careers. These stories from Oklahoma educators can help others name their own situations so they can begin thinking about what might be done. Recognizing that others have expressed and addressed similar feelings could help Oklahoma educators muster the energy and imagination to envision what the institution *could* be rather than feeling immobilized by what it currently *is*. As I worked on this study, I began to find evidence that there is a growing community of educators who are doing just that.

Several of my participants mentioned online communities and suggested I investigate a few of them. One of the most prominent social media movements is "#oklaed." According to their website, "the #OklaEd community" began at a conference in 2014 and, since then, has had "weekly Twitter chats at 8pm on Sunday nights" in an effort to "bring Oklahoma educators...together to network, collaborate, and share" (OklaEd Learning Showcase, n.d.). In addition to the Twitter exchanges, the movement has created a website and a prospering blog community. Other social media movements include Facebook groups such as: Educators for Facts, Openness, Responsibility, and Truth—Save Our Schools (EFFORT SOS), Oklahoma Parents and Educators for Public

Education, and Oklahomans for Great Public Schools. These groups are dedicated to forming communities for the purpose of protecting and improving Oklahoma's public schools. For example, the description on the EFFORT SOS (n.d.) homepage explains:

> This group has been created to gather together educators, parents, political leaders, and community members who will work to contribute a voice of reason into the politics of education. We will create collective action to speak truth to power on behalf of and in the best interest of our students and our communities.

While Oklahoma teachers have been actively building community online, they have not stopped there.

The most interesting development in the course of my research was the movement of teachers running for state office in 2016. Approximately 40 Oklahoma educators, including the 2016 Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, Shawn Sheehan, ran for open seats in the Oklahoma legislature during the June primaries (Wendler, 2016). Even more impressively, "at least 31 candidates for state House and Senate seats" that are on the ballot for November "appear[ed] to be current or former public school teachers who said running for office was partly inspired by a desire to improve schools" (Felder, 2016). Such developments, along with the findings from this study, could encourage current Oklahoma educators (including those in teacher preparation programs) to continue to exist in the system while working to transform it.

As mentioned in the introduction, some of my early frustration as a teacher came from the discrepancies between my personal expectations and institutional realities. Some of the frustrations felt by early career teachers could be alleviated through slight changes within teacher preparation programs. My participants' responses provide

insight into how teacher education could be improved to foster the skills candidates need to survive and thrive in the profession with lasting, satisfying careers.

One suggestion would be to provide teacher candidates with *early* opportunities to examine and develop their personal teaching philosophies. Since one key to becoming a survivor teacher is teaching authentically, it would be beneficial to have classes or experiences that encourage potential teachers to explore their own identities and values. As an undergraduate student, I recall talking about philosophies of education, but I was very rarely asked to *do* anything to develop my own until the semester before I graduated. I would assume part of the reason was that I did not have many first-hand experiences in the teacher role until the last semester.

To remedy this, perhaps teacher education programs should provide earlier opportunities for future teachers to take on meaningful roles as educators. This would allow future teachers to begin experiencing institutional realities for themselves and encourage them to reflect both individually and with their peers, about how they might cope with those realities. This, in turn, would help them develop a sense of teacher identity and "self" at an earlier stage. Earlier exposure to these experiences would allow young teachers the time to contemplate and articulate their teaching philosophies *before* they were suddenly thrust into classrooms and overwhelmed by factors such as paperwork, angry parents, and lunch duties.

Teacher education programs might also consider the benefits of providing opportunities for teacher candidates to interact with mentor survivor teachers. This could happen through a variety of means. One option might be setting up occasional panels during class time. Another option might be to provide future teachers with

opportunities to conduct informal interviews with willing mentors. It might also be advantageous for teacher preparation programs to ally with school districts to create mentor programs that can provide resources and foster community between beginning teachers and their survivor counterparts. While some schools have established mentoring programs, my experience is that these programs are generally superficial. For example, a beginning teacher's "mentor" is sometimes someone who only has a few more years of experience. Early and sustained interactions with teachers who are surviving and thriving might give starting teachers more realistic expectations and help them to manage institutional obstacles in a transformative rather than fatalistic way.

While I began my research in an attempt to cope with my personal frustrations with public education, I am left with the notion that simply naming the obstacles for myself is not enough. As teachers, we have an obligation to name the world for ourselves so we can maintain the ability to survive within the system long enough to make changes within it. However, if we stop there, we will only succeed in making short-term changes. If we only work to make the structures more manageable while we teach within the institution, what (or who) is to prevent those same structures from reverting when we leave? Moreover, the structures that govern public education have larger implications for our society as a whole. Students take the lessons, values, and skills they learn in public schools and live them out in their communities. Ultimately, the changes we make within the school system have the potential to affect the current social, political, and economic structures of our society. In order to truly make lasting changes to the education system and to our society as a whole, teachers should not merely aim to survive and thrive within the institution; they should also aim to help

others (parents, students, administrators, other teachers) learn to name the obstacles that constrain them, so that they might also work to transform their world.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Research question: What can be learned from "survivor" teachers' stories about how they simultaneously function within and *transform* the public education system?

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What subjects have you taught? What are you currently teaching?
3. Why did you become a teacher? A social studies/language arts teacher?
4. What do you see as the purpose of education? Of teaching your subject?
5. Based on your answers about the purpose of education and your subject, describe your vision of the ideal social studies/language arts curriculum.
6. To what extent do you believe you have or have not been successful in achieving this vision?
7. a. To the extent that you feel you have not been successful: what do you attribute that to? (In other words, what do you see as the obstacles and challenges to your success?)

   b. To the extent that you feel that you have been successful: what do you attribute that to?
8. How do you approach challenges to your vision of education/subject curriculum?
9. Describe some lessons/units/activities/strategies that you have implemented in your teaching career in order to promote your vision of education/your subject.