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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

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COURTING THE SHADOW:
A HEURISTIC STUDY OF VALUABLE LEARNING

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

JOHN R. ERWIN
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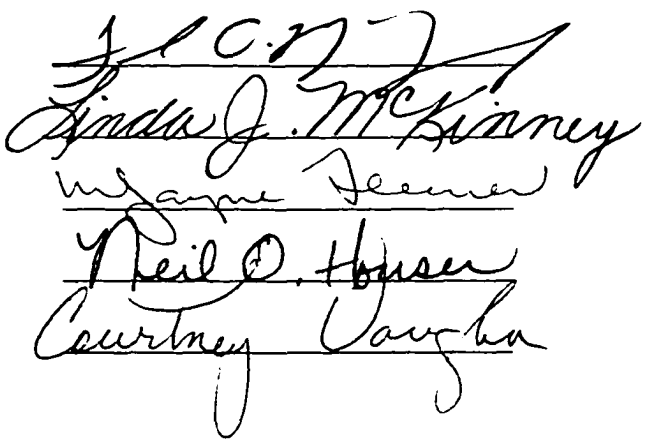
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COURTING THE SHADOW:
A HEURISTIC STUDY OF VALUABLE LEARNING

A dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY



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A few lines to acknowledge everyone's encouragement during this journey is as inadequate as Dorothy's thanks to the circle of friends who helped her find a way back home from Oz. This process has made me appreciate just how large is the circle that nurtures me. These brief epithets are insufficient to acknowledge the breadth of the kindness shown, but because they are friends, I know they will read my greater gratitude between the lines.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments iv
Abstract viii
Chapter 1 1
Background 1
Need for the Study 14
Research Question 18
Limitations and Delimitations 20
Definition of Terms 21
Heuristic Research 21
Postmodernism 21
Tacit Knowledge 22
Summary 22
Chapter 2 23
Review of the Literature 23
Philosophy of John Dewey Pertinent to This Study 26
Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead
Pertinent to This Study 29
Philosophy of Paulo Freire Pertinent to This Study 34
Philosophy of Maxine Greene Pertinent to This Study 39
Philosophy of Nel Noddings Pertinent to This Study 40
Existentialist Philosophy Pertinent to This Study 44
Summary 51
Chapter 3 52
Need and Background of the Study 52
Heuristic Research Methodology 54
Population 63
Procedure 64
Summary 66
Chapter 4 67
Findings and Analysis 69
Physical Qualities of the Learning Experience 71
Experience of Valuable Learning from the Student's
Point of View 73
The Value of Personal Worth 74
The Value of Purpose 77
The Value of Family Relationships 80
The Value of Community Relationships 84
The Value of Emotion 87
The Value of Personal Transcendence 89
Experience of Valuable Learning from the Teacher's Viewpoint 93
The Value of Ethical Caring 93
The Value of Process 97
The Value of Commitment 99
Final Analysis: What are the Qualities of Valuable Learning? 100

Chapter 5 102
Understanding Through Heuristic Methodology 103
Study Findings and Related Literature 105
Conclusions 107
Implications for Myself as a Teacher Learner 107
Understanding the Shadow 108
Recommendations for Teacher Training and School Reform 110
Reference List 113
Appendix 115

ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative investigation of learning from a learner's perspective. Heuristic research methodology was employed to isolate and describe the qualities of lessons deemed most important for personal development. Data collection utilized the researcher's observations and field notes combined with interviews of educators and students. Data collection and analysis were guided by the researcher's tacit knowledge. Descriptions of learning experiences were produced using the reflective guidelines associated with heuristic research: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.

Emergent themes resulting from this study are explicated. In descriptions of valued learning, student experiences signified the importance of personal worth, purpose, family relationships, community relationships, emotion and personal transcendence. Teachers were in agreement with student observations but additionally described the value of ethical caring, process development, and commitment.

The researcher's experience with heuristic methodology application is critiqued and the study's findings are related to pertinent literature. Finally, implications and recommendations for educators and educational reformers are presented as suggested by this research.

Chapter 1

This chapter begins with a narrative account of life experiences that ultimately lead me to this study. Through the introductory narrative, I will explicate personal needs fueling my research and the importance of this study. I will then describe the steps used in heuristic research to formulate my research question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? Specification of the project's limitations and delimitations will establish the scope of this study. Finally, to clarify both the research's goals and findings, relevant terms will be defined as specifically used in this study.

Background

...Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow...
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow...

--excerpt from "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot (1998)

Now I am standing in front of them, my first class. I'm wearing tired black loafers, gray flared slacks, a powder blue, buttoned-down Arrow shirt and the only tie I own. Leaning against a massive, yellowed, oak desk, I deliberately survey the battered room, attempting to silently greet each seated face with a studied expression of authority and confidence. At least I hope that's the impression I'm conveying; it certainly looked convincing last night as I practiced in the mirror while fumbling with my tie, trying to remember just how to knot the thing, right before I went into another

panic attack when I realized I knew nothing about English, much less about teaching, and did I remember enough Melville and Milton to get me through tomorrow?

"Hello, class. I'm Mr. Erwin and I will be your eighth grade English teacher. As a way of getting started, I'd like first to distribute this syllabus." As I moved about the room passing out papers, it was evident that my students had seated themselves in a deliberate pecking order. The front rows nearest my desk had been taken by the smallest children; smiling, pursed-lipped little girls with their hands clasped on desktops, and the kind of scrawny, bespectacled boys who are attentive like nervous puppies. The remaining two dozen students seemed exponentially larger and more sullen the nearer they sat to the classroom's back wall. (Much later I'd learn that three of my students had children of their own and at least five had driven themselves to school that day.) I spent the next 20 minutes referring to my printed plan as I shared a vision for our next nine months together. I spoke of the novels we'd read, the research projects we'd complete, how I graded, the tardy and late work policies, my educational objectives and the value of the knowledge I would impart to them during the upcoming, life-changing school year. With my prepared remarks completed and 35 minutes of the first period remaining, I managed to ad-lib, "Are there any questions?" Mercifully, the room's deadness was broken by the arm-flapping of one of the front row boys.

"Mr. Erwin! Oo-Oo! Mr. Erwin! "

"Yes? Do you have a question?"

"Yes, Mr. Erwin. What's a syllabus?"

Even 25 years later I can't offer a reasonable explanation of why I didn't bolt from the classroom at that very moment. Such early experiences provided ample evidence I was unprepared and even possibly unsuited to ever teach in the public schools, regardless of a state licensing board's judgment. So it first must be asked how a bewildered young man found himself teaching junior high school in a small, Southwestern border town. The short answer is that I wanted a job. I felt that my time in the Army had already put me *behind* in the race to pursue a career and livelihood. While my fellow graduates waited for openings at really *good schools*, my strategy was to take the first job offered, assuming that a degree and a year's experience would make me more marketable later.

I should have known that something wasn't right the day I interviewed for this job several hundred miles away from my home, but I wanted it badly. The school was located in a copper mining town (although the mines had been dying for years) on the border between the United States and Mexico. Although populations on either side were technically separate entities, actually both were rich, awkward blends of two strong cultures. On the U.S. side, Anglos were in the minority but they held powerful positions; controlling most of city government and the schools. I interviewed for the job in late summer, about three weeks before the start of school. I arrived precisely at the scheduled time, but the building appeared abandoned. In fact, much of the glass in the school's front windows had been vandalized. Presently, I saw a man hanging out from one of the broken windows, frantically waving me toward an unlocked door. It turned out he was the building principal who would interview me. As I sat nervously across his desk, trying not to be obvious as I scanned the wall of shattered

windows behind him, his first words were, "You know, we don't have bad kids here...they just need some guidance."

I had come prepared to answer questions about my educational philosophy (which would be necessarily succinct and not too profound, never having taught before) and to demonstrate knowledge of my subject matter. In the end, I would have been better prepared by embellishing my war stories. The principal asked nothing about which classes I liked in college, my favorite authors, or my student teaching experiences. Instead, he quickly steered the interview toward my Vietnam service. I had never considered that combat experience might earn a teaching position, but he offered me a job on the spot. Perhaps he was merely sympathetic to veterans attempting to re-enter society. But during my first year, I came to believe - rightly or wrongly - that the only way to curry favor with this man and many of his other teachers was to demonstrate complete control (in every sense) over my students. The message I heard was that a good classroom was quiet and orderly and a good teacher was one who handled his own discipline problems using whatever means were effective. This was not my favorite year.

When I recall my first year, what I am most ashamed of is that I actually tried to become the teacher I thought they wanted. Fortunately for my first class, I wasn't any more competent at teaching that way than I had been at soldiering. Despite my efforts, I couldn't rationalize the disparity between throwing a student up against a locker one moment and later using literature to convince that same student about love's redemptive and transformational qualities. Additionally, my students always

had the power to destroy my greatest, best-rehearsed performances with their disquieting realities.

"What good is poetry? Can you make money at it, Mr. Erwin?"

"Well, not usually. But isn't it beautiful for its own sake? Don't you need something beautiful in your life?"

"And why do we have to write these essays about it? I don't know no one who has to write essays to get a job. I could get a job next year working my uncle's shift at the mine."

"You're right. Not every job requires these skills."

"How much do you make a year, Mr. Erwin? My Dad says he makes twice what you do and he didn't even get to the eighth grade."

"Well, that's fine. I'm sure he does but the world is bigger than this valley. If you're ever going to get out of this place you'll need the things I am trying to teach you."

"Why would I want to live somewhere else? All my friends are here. I can make money and buy a truck and get a place. I don't need to leave."

Because of exchanges like that, I never felt competent for very long. I was blind to my own arrogance. I constantly quizzed my students, but there were many questions I never asked myself. Why, for instance, had I assumed they wanted to leave this place? What did I know about their community and culture except that it wasn't mine? Despite brave talk, I had no intention of enriching their lives; I was trying to save them from themselves. The way I taught implied (and not too subtly)

that everything they knew was wrong and lacked value and quality. My answers only made sense if they first denied everything they were.

I had taken this job with a vague and lofty notion that calling myself a teacher made me an agent of art and beautiful ideas. In the end, I became a custodian of state property. Regardless of how idealistically my lesson plans read, my true objectives were protecting furniture from vandalism, keeping textbooks from being lost or defaced, and defending my incompetence with meticulously kept records. I worried about the welfare of a chair rather than the well-being of the child who sat in it. I valued stewardship of books more highly than stewardship of the ideas contained in books. I acted as if what is legally right is always morally right as well.

As used in "The Hollow Men," poet Eliot's (1925) image of *the Shadow* suggests the presence of a spiritual bankruptcy that ultimately cancels any attempted positive or redemptive action. In the poem, one culminating effect of individual failures to confront *the Shadow* is a degenerating society doomed to a whimpering death. From the very beginning of my career (when I still believed that only students bore responsibility for failure) I was at least subconsciously aware of a *shadow* that debased my smallest victories. Even righteous idealism and faith in prescriptive solutions I carried from university education classes didn't protect me from the shadow of growing uneasiness with my classroom philosophy and structure. Although I hadn't yet read the works of Michael Polanyi (1969), I now know it was his postmodern vision of tacit knowledge that informed my growing dissatisfaction. The worst part of my earliest struggles was that I was unable to isolate or even describe the shadow that hampered every attempt to change my unhappiness. Much

later Maxine Greene (1988), echoing the existentialists, would advise me that my attempted solutions were futile because no obstacle *can* be removed until it is named. I entered the classroom professing love for my children but when they didn't respond as gratefully as I thought they should, I responded with increased inflexibility. Sadly for my growth, when I taught my first class, Nel Noddings (1992) had yet to publish her visions of caring in the schools.

I only taught for one year in the valley. My employer was not unkind to me, but neither did he encourage me to stay. My first class sent me away with a similarly ambiguous farewell. The last day, one of them wrote on the outside of my classroom door with permanent markers, "Good luck Mr. Erwin! We will miss you!!" I spent more than an hour trying to scrub it clean before a custodian told me to just leave.

After that first discouraging year, I retreated to graduate school where a couple of former, sympathetic professors offered me temporary refuge with a teaching assistantship. ("Maybe you'd be better at the college level. It's more challenging in many ways. Men don't always work well with children.") To those professors I will always be grateful. They didn't have the answers I sought but they showed me compassion. Unfortunately for them and for me, we hadn't yet been exposed to Paulo Freire's (1999) theories of oppression and freedom. If we had, we would have understood that no one makes another person free; freedom is a process that begins and ends within the spirit of the individual. Even the best intentions can be ineffective. During this temporary retreat, I developed respect for the complexity of my professors' work, but I also learned I was not suited for those particular demands and pressures either. Within the next two years I returned to teach in the

public schools where I have practiced ever since. Only now, as I near retirement, do I think I am beginning to understand what a teacher does and how I can do it best. Although my career has been a tremendous learning experience for *me*, I must wonder if the process was as fulfilling for my students! Experience is a grand teacher, but surely there is a more expedient way to produce effective teachers than leaving them to sink or swim. ("Practice for 20 or so years and I'm sure you'll get the hang of it.") Drowning is such a slow death.

During my 51 years, I have spent at least part of 42 years in classrooms. I used to separate the time I've been classified as student or teacher. Only recently have I become convinced that's a false delineation. My growing intuitive sense of teaching and learning's reciprocal relationship would later be borne out when I discovered the writings of John Dewey (1916) and Alfred North Whitehead (1967), but at that time I believed *teacher* was a designation of rank. Such unquestioning acceptance of a natural hierarchy betrays the modernist assumptions that drove me. Accordingly, my understanding was that each educational discipline contained a finite body of information entrusted to teachers who in turn bestowed their students with that knowledge. Chosen students who displayed mastery and reverence for the discipline became teachers to a new generation of students and thereby preserved and perpetuated the cycle of culture. In that sense, I imagined myself not unlike the intellectual outcasts in Ray Bradbury's (1982) Fahrenheit 451 who each *became* a forbidden but sacred book, saving it without deliberate or significant modification, in order to preserve civilization's core from the infidels. There *is* satisfaction in mastering facts. A classical education *can* help individuals to feel connected to their

cultural heritage. However, if mere memorization and instantaneous recall of inert facts is called mastery, then we must also admit the limitations of such an accomplishment.

I no longer believe that it is enough to merely lay a body of lifeless, factual material before my students and expect them automatically to understand that it is frankincense and myrrh. Since my earliest classroom experiences, I have discovered Alfred North Whitehead's (1967) descriptions of the futility of *inert facts* which have convinced me that teaching must be comprised of much more even though I am not entirely sure what *much more* encompasses. Although it was not my original intent or expectation, one consequence of my doctoral program has been a more deliberate confrontation with the *shadow* that has haunted all my professional life. Graduate school's guided readings have been beneficial but this heuristic study is a more focused attempt to explore the question at my shadow's core: what is the experience of valuable learning? What is embodied by *valuable learning*? Most important, how is the experience described by the learner? Certainly, part of my responsibility as a teacher is to provide accurate, factual information, but the greater accountability is to orchestrate meaningful connections between the material taught and the individual lives and dreams of my students. In a world wired by satellite television, cell phones, and instantaneous electronic publishing, facts are plentiful and cheap. Accumulating data is no longer the greatest challenge for today's citizen; it is being able to sense what information is true, valuable, and useful enough to retain. Even in the most economically deprived settings there is now such informational overload, that indiscriminate *learning* can hinder rather than enable growth. Accordingly, as a

teacher I can't safely limit my responsibility to being a keeper of cultural literacy's flame. If I compare knowledge to a flame then I must embrace all its metaphorical aspects. While a flame can light the darkness, it flickers with varying intensity. What is illuminated by a flame is contingent upon the viewer's perspective: it can clarify or distract, it can warm or destroy, it can comfort or terrorize, it can wound or it can cauterize. If the stories I teach only illustrate how I have navigated my own darkness, then classes are little more than self-indulgent celebrations of myself. And this is not teaching. However naive, my hope from the start was that the knowledge which illuminated paths through my struggles could serve as tools for students envisioning pathways to their own unique futures. This study is necessary to enhance my effectiveness as a teacher and my receptivity as a learner. Additionally, it has societal application to educational reform which currently is being formulated mostly by persons who are not involved in the daily struggle of teaching.

As life-defining as being an educator has been for me, I came into the profession almost accidentally. My family were carpenters and other tradesmen. In high school I was never more than a "B" student even in the English classes where I found the most comfortable fit. The four-year school I attended was comprised of only 400 students who were bussed from three towns and all the cattle ranches in a 35 mile radius. My favorite teacher was my senior English teacher. I still remember him leaning up against his big oak desk, looking rumpled in gray slacks, a white, short-sleeved, drip-dried shirt and one of his three dark, skinny ties. Although my friends begrudgingly admitted he was brilliant, he was often the butt of student jokes fueled by rumors about his personal life. He was a middle-aged bachelor who lived

in a basement room of our two-story school in exchange for serving as a nighttime security guard for the isolated school property.

My friends often speculated about his evident lack of a love life and conjectured that every Monday's haggard look had something to do with alcohol. I was never privy to the truth of his life outside the classroom but none of that mattered during the days when he really taught. He was a good writer (he shared some of his short stories) who continually made allusions to a science fiction novel that he was just months away from finishing. He knew how essays should be constructed and quoted our red Harbrace grammar text like other folks did Scripture. He could be impressive but he was never as alive as when he talked about literature. He was always clear about what we would need to know for Friday's test, but I lived for the detours his lectures often took. Sometimes, while underscoring a particularly significant passage in the day's reading, he would be reminded of something else - another book we hadn't read, a movie we hadn't seen, a nugget he'd found in the morning paper, or a scrap of some childhood memory - and there would be a momentary display of joyful sparks. Then, just as suddenly, he would return to the task at hand, waving it all away with "but that won't be on the test" or "your folks don't pay me to teach you that." He did what he as paid to do and taught us the test. I didn't graduate wanting to be my senior English teacher but neither did I ever shake the look of him or the feeling that he had something I wanted, some secret understanding, some key to how it all worked. What did I sense was so important about his lectures? Did he consciously understand how to break through the protection of our adolescent narcissism and feigned indifference? Did he possess

knowledge of some methodology that now could shrink the shadow as I try to reach my students? In retrospect, I suspect the impact this teacher had on my life is not explained by what he *was paid to teach*, but might be found somewhere among his *detours* from the official curriculum.

When I enrolled in a religious college the next fall, I was a ministerial student preparing for seminary. That school year was another dead end that resulted in succumbing to a few years of bitterness. In retrospect, I meant well and I know they loved people, too, but there I learned I wasn't as interested in saving their souls as I was in saving them from poverty and hopelessness. Befitting the social and political realities of the time, without the protection of full-time student status, I was soon in Vietnam. Sometimes I wish I had riveting stories of my experiences in a war zone, but the truth is that as a soldier I had more in common with Vonnegut's (1969) Billy Pilgrim than with John Wayne. My tenure was so charmed that even a groundless and quickly discarded court marshal worked in my favor by enabling me to work with civilians rather than shoot them. The only wounds I sustained during my 14 months in Vietnam were to my heart and mind. What saved me were books. When I wasn't in the field and temporarily safe in base camps, there was time to prowl through the Red Cross book boxes. By the time it was my turn, all the westerns, spy novels, and sex books had been grabbed and I was forced to make due with leftovers. As unlikely as it sounds, it was in Vietnam that I first understood and enjoyed classic works by Herman Hesse, Hawthorne and Poe. This study's exploration of what learners describe as valuable cannot ignore the meaning of such experiences, however

infrequent or under-reported. What motivated a battlefield soldier to teach himself without the benefit of a prescribed curriculum and mastery testing?

When I returned to college just weeks after my discharge from the Army, I enrolled in English classes and the college of education. Although I still couldn't envision teaching as a life-long career, I allowed that it might be a temporary and practical necessity on the way to somewhere else. Choosing literature courses was an effort to convince myself that my brain had not been a casualty of the war. Perhaps intuitively I was also searching for a way to rediscover the *detours* taken by my English teacher years before.

For 25 years, to at least some degree, my life has been diminished by the presence of *the Shadow*. It would be pretentious to compare my shadow to T.S. Eliot's. My conflicted life will not spell the end of Western Civilization, but it is real and comprised of all the issues of confidence, competence, and connectedness to the world that are implicit in the metaphor. I have never gained complete understanding of this obstacle's power, but at various points in my entangled personal and professional lives, I have been able to block out its presence for short periods of time. This doctoral program has made it impossible to ignore these ancient issues, especially when through the writings of Dewey, Whitehead, Freire, Greene, Noddings, et al, I learned that others had confronted and were confronting the same issues that haunted me as a practicing teacher.

Tacitly, I knew there were common threads throughout my experienced history of real and worthy learning moments – both as student and as teacher. I wanted to consciously examine all facets of those experiences. However, because

this is not anything that can held and counted with conventional methodology, at first I saw no way to investigate my concerns. From my viewpoint, even most forms of qualitative research methodology attempt to employ a measure of objectivity that distances itself too far from such an important but ephemeral topic. For me, a turning point was discovering Clark Moustakas' Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications (1990) which draws no line between the researcher and object of the quest. Utilizing both student and teacher frames of reference, I will examine the learning process by exploring heuristically the question: what is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? My efforts may fail, but I hope to examine the shadow that still hounds me. Although this research will not produce prescriptive solutions, the conversation may provide comfort and encouragement to others mired in similar self-doubt. If they can learn to confront their own shadows more productively, perhaps teachers could avoid the paralyzing disillusionment that is too common in the profession. Finally, I hope that dialogs such as this will be heard by those who seek to change our schools. In this society, an inordinate amount of power over the public schools' destiny is in the hands of persons whose agendas do not include the students' welfare. I hope that this study might begin to provide a voice for those children.

Need for the Study

Of all American institutions, there is none that affects the lives of as many citizens more often or personally as the public schools. Nor is there a bureaucracy more susceptible to attempted control by powers outside the institution. Federal and state legislatures with their affiliated lobbyists, task forces, blue ribbon committees,

and think tanks; all levels of the judicial system, university education departments, labor unions, local school boards, parental rights groups, consultants, televised political analysts, talk radio hosts, syndicated columnists and editorial writers have all had a greater role in determining our schools' philosophy and curriculum than the teachers and pupils who inhabit those classrooms. Accordingly, reform that is not centered on the realities of classroom experience has been a cyclic patchwork of conflicting regulation whose implementation and influence is as fleeting as the advocate's political life.

Current educational reform too often amounts to increasing graduation requirements (more of the same) or advocating additional testing and homework. For teachers, implied chastisement for not doing a good enough job is inherent in reform measures and the remedy is usually additional staff development from outsiders telling them that they are not doing a good enough job. It should be asked whether the unacceptable skill levels of too many high school graduates result from too many *broken* teachers and students in our classrooms or from too much wrongheaded reform and accountability.

As a teacher I am insulted when critics imply that all would be fine if only my students and I worked harder. I am appalled that anyone could believe they've concocted a comprehensive list of facts whose mastery will ensure universal success and fulfillment in life. Indeed, if these facts are so central to successful citizenship, then they should be printed and distributed, as one constructs drivers' license test manuals for easier and more uniform mastery by our citizens. If these exams are claimed to be predictive, then they should be field-tested by prominent business

people, religious leaders, artists, and elected members of our legislative bodies. As currently constructed, it must be asked whether this testing mania draws useful profiles of students or if focusing on minutia does less to uplift people than to maintain the social and economic status quo. Is standardized testing so uniformly embraced by non-teachers because of its true instructional value or because it meets politicians' and media's need for something that's concrete and explainable with simplified graphics and statistics? Has our pursuit of fiscal efficiency and accountability diminished our visions of education's possibilities and responsibilities? Are we teaching what is most valuable to learners or merely what can be measured most conveniently? I am not convinced that the lessons most valuable for maintaining identity and opportunity for all students can be measured in any quantitative way, much less by a standardized exit exam of facts. Too little of our current testing reflects the realities of my students' lives and too rarely are they even asked about their perceived needs. At the very least, experience suggests that life is more *essay* than multiple choice-- answers will vary.

Current public demands for aligned curriculums, mastery tests, and elusive *accountability* are nothing new. The attacks on the public schools have not changed over the years, but I have. Early in my career I worked slavishly to follow the edicts of outsiders. However, when I finally listened to my students and to my own heart, my teaching began evolving into something quite different from my critics' vision. Certainly there is a place for *facts* in my curriculum but increasingly that aspect of education has taken a diminished importance in my classroom. A standardized presentation of information implies the standardization of acceptable life options. I

have never had a returning student thank me for teaching them the definition of a relative pronoun, but I have been thanked for pushing them to express their opinions, encouraging them to trust their instincts and for valuing their unique insights. Accordingly, I now incorporate more journal writing than isolated grammar exercises and formal, five paragraph essays. I have discovered that journal exercises not only improve the content of their public writing but also offer the teacher a rich source for learning a student's most immediate needs, fears and dreams. Similarly, I have found that years after graduation former students rarely can recall the name Macbeth's castle, but they still can explain what happened to a man who lost touch with his ideals.

Being attentive to what remains meaningful to my students after the learning has been forgotten has given me the courage to teach outside of my state approved texts and stacks of constantly revised curriculum guides. I no longer worry whether the literature I use falls into the prescribed time and cultural categories. When a textbook company removes a work from their newest edition (often for political or cost considerations), I keep what my students' reactions and artifacts suggest is the best for their growth.

Today's challenge is to develop educational objectives based not upon some distant, standardized, top-down curriculum assembled with political compromise, but ones directly generated by the realities and dreams of current students, graduates of our public schools, and teachers closest to the daily task of education. Any attempts at school reform must center on its usefulness in maintaining students' individual identities while providing equal opportunity to achieve their unique futures. I need to

understand what learners consider the most valuable life lessons and how that information might transform not only my teaching, but my life and the lives of my students as well. The things I most want to know cannot be counted or graphed or even generated from modernist perspectives that are mired in antiquated mechanistic and clockwork metaphors.

Tacit knowledge recognizes no separation of mind and body. Polanyi (1969) asserts that all individuals know more than they can express and that their tacit understanding is the basis for all knowledge. Heuristic research acknowledges the legitimacy of the tacit understanding that informs all lives, regardless of social and economic inequities, and attempts to give it voice. If society is bent on identifying the true educational needs of its citizens, heuristic research may offer the most hopeful path because it begins by trusting each person to know already. Perhaps the best way to standardize the experience of valuable learning is to embrace the diversity of individual life visions.

Research Question

A major difference between Moustakas' (1990) model of heuristic research and other qualitative designs is his insistence on formulating a single, focused research question. Admittedly, there are usually other questions imbedded in that central question, but the variety and open-ended methods employed during heuristic research necessitate the *anchor* of a single question "having all the qualities of simplicity, concreteness, specificity, and clarity" (p. 41). Specifically, Moustakas lists five characteristics that should be reflected by the formulated question: (1) It should embody a phenomenon of human experience and seek to reveal its essence.

(2) It should seek to discover qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of the phenomenon. (3) It should actively, personally, and passionately engage the researcher's whole self. (4) It should not be stated so that it seeks to predict or establish causal relationships. (5) Rather than encouraging quantitative descriptions, the question should be stated so that the phenomenon can be illustrated using creative and personal approaches.

Moustakas' suggested process for formulating an effective heuristic research question includes: (1) Without conscious design, creating lists of topics or interests that are intriguing to the researcher. (2) Examine the list and cluster topics into sub-themes. (3) Set aside clusters that imply causal relationships or imply conscious assumptions. (4) Consider the remaining sub-themes until a single, basic question emerges that passionately awakens your interest. (5) Formulate a simple, clear statement of precisely what it is you want to know.

Following this model, my formulated research question is: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? During the writing of this chapter several imbedded questions are already apparent, such as: (1) What is the experience of valuable learning from a teacher's point of view? (2) What is the experience of valuable learning from a student's point of view? (3) What adaptations in teaching methodology are suggested by the experience of valuable learning? (4) What broader principles of school reform are suggested by the experience of valuable learning?

These are interesting questions but they are also considerably narrower than the initial research question. To focus on the imbedded questions would be an

attempt to pre-determine the direction of my inquiry, and result in limiting the scope and honesty of my exploration. The fact that these imbedded topics emerged so effortlessly during a cursory utilization of the heuristic method is a testament to its greater effectiveness. Accordingly, my research is driven by the single question: What is the experience of valuable learning?

Limitations and Delimitations

The very personal, random nature and open-ended methodology of heuristic research precludes me from duplicating this study exactly, much less another researcher. The paths that research take are spontaneous and determined by intuitive connections of the moment. When the researcher is fully engaged by the topic, new meanings and whole new territories for exploration can be opened by something as chance as a newspaper clipping or the particular musty smell of a room. Heuristic research's spontaneous, individualistic nature is considered a strength more than a limitation since it provides endless methods for access to tacit knowledge. Another limitation of this heuristic is that by definition it will not produce quantitative data for comparison, prescriptive lists to remedy problems or analyze causal relationships. I do, however, believe that the study's results might expand and enliven public discussion about learning in the public schools.

The most obvious delimitation of this study is that it will be supplemented by interviews with only adults 18 and older who mostly, although not exclusively, reside in the same, small geographic area. These interviews are meant to encourage reflection rather than provide quantitative data. The age delineation is a function of the Internal Review Board's legal requirements more than my natural curiosity. (In

another research situation, I would be interested in exploring the perceptions of learners during their earliest years when learning often appears effortless, rapid and joyful.) The limited geographic scope has been determined by lack of financial resources. Data gathering has also been intentionally limited by time factors relating to the timely completion of this doctoral program.

Definition of Terms

Heuristic Research

This study's heuristic research model is specifically based upon Clark Moustakas's model as presented in his 1990 book, Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications. Moustakas' design for qualitative research emphasizes tacit knowledge and utilizing individual, human experience as a means of knowing. In his design there is no attempt to separate the researcher from co-researchers or from the experience being studied. Moustaka's model is comprised of six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a popularly used term without a single, agreed upon definition. As used in connection with Michael Polanyi and Clark Moustakas in discussions of heuristic research, postmodernism can be usefully seen as a description of movement away from modernism's reliance on hierarchical division and absolutism toward a vision of connectedness and multiple perspectives. One of Polanyi's contributions to the evolving scope of postmodernism is his denial that there

can be true objectivity in any search for meaning. Accordingly, he elevates the human experience as a reliable way of knowing.

Tacit Knowledge

The things we know implicitly (or unconsciously) are called tacit knowledge by Polanyi (1969.) Because this implicit knowledge informs the things we know explicitly (or consciously), Polanyi considers tacit understanding to be the basis for *all* knowledge. Tacit knowledge is present in all of us, but it cannot be expressed until intuition links unconscious and conscious awareness. Moustakas' (1990) model of heuristic research uses Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge as its core assumption because it expands our ways of knowing and finding meaning in ways that other research methods ignore by limiting knowledge to being a conscious process.

Summary

In this chapter I provided a narrative collection of significant life experiences that lead me to pursue this particular research topic. I then discussed why the study is both personally important and its broader social applications and implications. Using Moustakas' (1990) heuristic model, I then formulated my central research question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? To establish the scope of my research I described the study's limitations and delimitations. Lastly, to aid understanding of my methods and findings, I defined important terms or specialized usage in this study.

Chapter 2

This chapter presents results of searches for academic studies that also seek to understand the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective. Additionally, it offers a brief description of the current social context that complicates the process of researching this topic. Finally, the chapter provides overviews of pertinent educational theory and philosophy which have direct bearing on this research.

Review of the Literature

Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating began his first term in 1995 by requiring four years of English along with two years apiece of math, science, and social studies to graduate from high school. For high school freshman in 2000, graduation requirements were increased to three years apiece for math, science, and social studies in addition to the previous four years of English. Most recently, Governor Keating told luncheon members of The State Chamber:

> We passed curriculum rigor together to make us one of the top 15 states in the union in what we expect of our students. It's only the beginning. In February [2002], I plan to provide real indigestion to some of my friends in the teachers unions by raising the bar even higher, much higher, and insisting that every child take four years of math, and four years of English, and four years of social sciences and four years of English, and two years of language arts, music and art. (Jackson, 2001, p. 1)

Although the governor's sneering challenge to educators brought predictable warnings from the educational bureaucracy concerning practical ramifications

stemming from the proposed standards, his proclamation played well in the conservative press and mirrored recent federal legislation that has earned bipartisan support in the House and Senate. President Bush said of recently passed federal educational reform bills, "These historic reforms will improve public schools by creating an environment in which every child can learn – through real accountability, unprecedented flexibility for states and school districts, greater local control, more options for parents and more funding for what works" (Toppo, 2001, p. 1). Claims for *real accountability* in both Oklahoma and federal reform proposals hinge upon faith in standardized testing. At the federal level, current proposals mandate the first phase of state tests will be in reading and math for every child in the third through eighth grades beginning in the 2005-2006 school year. The extent of future funding and how federal moneys may be spent will be determined by periodic, published *report cards* showing a school's standardized test scores compared to both other local and state schools.

Of course, without adequate state and federal funding for hiring additional qualified teachers (already in short supply), equalizing resources of all large and small school districts in order to meet standardized objectives, or even affording the massive cost of the testing itself, this brave talk will remain a rant rather than reform. Long time educators should be forgiven their cynicism about government's attention span regarding any educational reform, especially ones requiring continual strategic adjustments or a constant infusion of tax dollars. Simply *raising the bar* without providing resources or strategies that might allow success is a cheap, political ploy. One ridiculous implication of Governor Keating's challenge is that Oklahoma's

children are not well-educated only because too little has been demanded of them. If *raising the bar* is all that is required, if just saying something makes it so, then why hasn't drug abuse or teenage pregnancy been similarly abolished by *just saying no*? Why hasn't proclaiming Oklahoma a *right to work* state automatically made it a hotbed for entrepreneurs and industrialization? Admittedly, a solution must be envisioned before it can be achieved, but in the political arena *common sense* rhetoric has too much currency with those persons least engaged in the process.

As society seeks to improve its schools and the futures of our children, all voices must be listened to. School administrators should not be portrayed as mere defenders of the inadequate status quo when they ask whether increased graduation requirements will dictate seven period days over the current six, require implementation of block scheduling, force employment of more uncertified teachers, remove sporting activities from the official school day, limit electives, damage the arts, poorly serve students with disabilities, or eliminate vocational programs. Why is it so difficult to believe that they might want our schools to be an effective partnership with the community? Teachers who insist that neither their own accomplishments nor those of students can be adequately profiled using only standardized math and science scores should not be caricatured as sniveling incompetents. Despite reports to the contrary, most of our nation's best teachers are not currently in other professions, waiting to be coaxed into our schools by merit pay or higher salaries and increased health benefits. Of those persons who possess the greatest capacity for caring and teaching, the majority are already in classrooms. Still, it is doubtful that all teachers are as effective as they could be or want to be. In

part, the media's demonization of the educational establishment has undercut public trust in educators. However, the greatest single source of teacher frustration may be that teachers and students essentially have been removed from the debate concerning what is the experience of valuable learning – that content and the parameters of learning have been established without regard to the learner needs and desires.

This heuristic study seeks to explore the experience of valuable learning from the learner's point of view. A recent ERIC search for similar studies produced 24,744 *hits* when using the search word *learning*. However, using *learner* produced just 861 *hits* and all of those sampled were teacher-oriented research, how teachers might affect the process of learning. My search suggests that there have been few clinical attempts to describe the experience from the learners' point of view except when concerned with manipulative strategies. This generally mirrors society's top-down approach to educational reform although the approach stands in direct contradiction to the greater published body of educational philosophy and theory.

Philosophy of John Dewey Pertinent to This Study

One of the clearest discussions of Dewey's (1990) fundamental approaches to education can be found in his The Child and the Curriculum published in 1902. Dewey begins by observing that "profound differences in theory are never gratuitous or invented" (p. 3). In fact, the more genuine the conflict between opposing viewpoints, the more likely advocates are to defend their views as independent truths rather than acknowledge all views as various parts of the same conflict, all in need of adjustment and adaptation to each other. "It is easier to see the conditions in their separateness, to insist upon one at the expense of the other, to make antagonists of

them, than to discover a reality to which each belongs" (p. 4). Applied to public education, dualism resulting from such separateness can be stated as "child vs. adult...[or]...child vs. curriculum...[or]... individual nature vs. social culture" (p. 5). A child's world as described by Dewey is one that is limited and personalized. Importance of information to the learner is dependent on how it affects the child's own well being and that of his family and friends. The typical school curriculum is in opposition to the child's natural concerns, presenting various studies that divide and classify the world according to foreign principles of the adult world. The curriculum content is separate in both time and space from the child's previous knowledge and ignores the value of personal experience as a contextual anchor for new knowledge. Apparently, because information does not pass into a child's mind in the same logical, organized fashion valued by adults, children who don't always learn this way have proven themselves to some educators to be faulty and in need of correction. Too often adults in charge of perpetuating a curriculum react as though childhood is "something to be got away from as soon as possible and as much as possible" (p.15). As Ohanian (1999) puts it, "...we should not look at children as a disease that we need to cure" (p. 62).

Dewey (1990) chastises *old* education for not recognizing that stages of human development don't render a child permanently unteachable, only unteachable when developmentally inappropriate methods are forced upon the child. Likewise, he chastises *new* education for regarding the child's present abilities and interests as rigid and absolute. Dewey's belief is that "learnings and achievements are fluid and moving. They change from day to day and from hour to hour" (p.15). If teaching is

aimed only at the child's present level, then there can be no new achievement, no growth. Whereas *old education* often was too fact driven and prescriptive, Dewey thought a fallacy of *new education* was insisting the child develop on his own without outside interference or pressure. "Nothing can be developed from nothing" (p.18). For Dewey, education should accommodate the student's personal journey by presenting facts in the form of a personalized map. "Through the map every new traveler may get for his own journey the benefits of the results of other's explorations without the waste of energy and loss of time involved in their wanderings" (p.20). The educator's task is to group facts by some useful, common principle and present them so the child is lead logically toward relevant, useful futures; thus eliminating wasteful chance associations and detours. Further, classroom experiences should be connected to experiences already in the child's memory and consistent with predictable experiences that lie naturally and reasonably ahead.

According to Dewey (1990), a teacher must determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed. He is concerned not only with the subject-matter, but with the subject-matter as a related factor in a total growing experience. Without "...organic connection... [knowledge is merely symbolic;]...it is dead and barren" (p. 23). Facts presented without a useful context are not motivating for the child learner and such processed facts may actually damage a child's intellectual and emotional development. Significantly, the predictable presentation of non-involving facts and mastery solely through mechanical memorization can become comfortable, even pleasurable, for the child. It requires so little energy, so little investment by the learner. "We get used to the

chains we wear, and miss them when they are removed" (p. 28), Dewey warns. The value of knowledge is determined by its usefulness as a tool for defining the environment of the child. By "directing indirectly, [a teacher manipulates conditions such that the children's] own activities move inevitably...toward such culmination of themselves" (p. 31). At the same time, Dewey reminds educators that despite their conscious construction of the curriculum, "the teacher knows neither what the present power, capacity or attitude is, nor yet how it is to be asserted, exercised, and realized" (p. 31).

Today, the writings of John Dewey (1990) will disappoint anyone trying to repair all the apparent malfunctions of our public schools, if for no other reason than the scope of what society expects from the schools is now so much greater. However, he was a man unaffected by many of the most limiting features of his era's modernist thinking. Dewey understood the transitory and subjective nature of truth, rejected prevalent dualistic thought, avoided the determinist trap of behaviorism, valued experimentation and diversity, supported integration of the arts and sciences, elevated the status of the child in the educational process, and sought to produce citizens with active, involved, connected lives. That is still an admirable beginning for reform. These attitudes should be examined by anyone trying to humanize our educational factories.

Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead Pertinent to This Study

Alfred North Whitehead's (1967) The Aims of Education published in 1929 provides a useful overview of process philosophy as applied to educational issues. His common thread in all educational endeavors is unity. "There is only one subject-

matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations" (p. 6). Implicit in this statement is not only redefining the scope of traditional course content, but also the reorganization of cultural knowledge to eliminate the traditional division of disciplines. In this sense, there is a postmodern tone to Whitehead.

> Modernity began by dividing reality into two worlds of mind and matter, freeing the latter from religious concern so that it could be explored by objectifying scientific methods. It then proceeded to separate the world into compartments, each of which could be studied in separation from the others. If the world were truly machinelike, this might work. (Griffin et al., 1993, p.169)

If all things are interconnected and fragmentation falsifies reality, then the machine metaphor imbedded in our educational institutions undercuts any desire or ability to usefully educate our citizens.

Process theory, which is less a learning theory than an analogy with implications for learning theory, attempts to merge a more accurate description of nature with a fresh portrayal of man's interaction with his world. Sometimes Whitehead's (1967) diction is troublesome and eccentric (*after-life, seamless learning, inert ideas, religious education*), but examination suggests these are intentional labels with a kind of useful poetry that reflects his vision of the world as a place without borders. Whitehead describes learning as a cyclic process as natural and as observable as the seasons or the tides. All beings and things within an environment (such as a classroom) affect each other in endless re-occurrence. He states (and Dewey might agree) that "the mind is never passive; it is a perpetual

activity, delicate, receptive, responsive" (p. 6). In Whitehead's view, a teacher can't make a student learn, but by being respectful of learning's general, natural patterns, the process can be made more orderly, efficient and obviously connected. His vision places the learner at the process' center, relegating the teacher to a guide or facilitator. Acknowledging learning as an elemental and natural process for all beings lends as much dignity to the learner as to the teacher, a step toward sharing power.

Whitehead's (1967) notion of rhythmic mental growth parallels a vision of life as a series of passages through cyclic recurrences. He chooses "the term rhythmic as meaning essentially the conveyance of difference within a framework of repetition" (p. 17). Although Whitehead adapts Hegel's model of progress (*thesis, antithesis, synthesis*) to describe his own observations about intellectual progress, he renames the stages to make them *happily suggestive.* Whitehead's model first describes *The Stage of Romance* that typically occurs from age seven to 13. This is a period when knowledge accumulation is driven by novelty and wonder rather than systematic exploration. Learning at age 14 through 18 often illustrates *The Stage of Precision* when random knowledge is analyzed. For Whitehead, Hegel's synthesis generally occurs between the ages of 18 and 22 during *The Stage of Generalization.*

Although the age ranges seem arbitrary, they are illustrative of the process he observes. Because Whitehead (1967) asserts that these cycles overlap (knowledge, for instance, is accumulated during all stages) and a single learner may be simultaneously at different stages depending upon the academic discipline in question, it is not contradictory when he declares, "You may not divide the seamless

coat of learning" (p.11). Further, he suggests that active learning cannot occur without practical application and context that is best accomplished with a continual, repeating schedule of alternating freedom and discipline.

My experience suggests that it is easier to agree with Whitehead's (1967) principles than to make direct application of them in the classroom. As Oliver (1989) observes, because process theory rejects the validity of the factory-based school with its teacher-centered knowledge transference, Whitehead believes that power resides in all individual units in a classroom that is not merely defined by human beings but by the physical characteristics and history of a setting and aspects of other participants. However, power can be modified by negotiated social contracts or by the power inherent in what Whitehead calls *occasions* (movement to actualize intention). In his ideal classroom there are no sharply drawn divisions of components and things "just happen [in a] spontaneous convergence of intention" (p.163). Because classroom patterns emerge in response to individual inner desires, the teacher's challenge becomes to choreograph learning with shared power and intention rather than force. Discussion of learning is based on Whitehead's premise that an entity naturally seeks movement, not for the sake of improvement but for mere novelty. Accordingly, teacher-compelled knowledge is "really only useful as a catalyst for the active use of the student's creativity" (p.166) which is also self-impelled. Application suggests that teachers best serve students by providing activity in the presence of knowledge. Because every conversation is novel and has impact upon both the speaker and listener, outdated factory-production imagery must be replaced with a *toolmaker's metaphor*. At times, application sometimes causes problems even among those most

sympathetic to him, such as Whiteheadian scholar Oliver (1989) when he allows the linear Newtonian sense of absolute time, although *wrong,* is a workable tool as modern man strives to conquer time by controlling nature. "We do, in fact, achieve wondrous acts within this framework: the bounty of the machine model has proved generous" (p.194). Later, however, Oliver accurately observes that our concept of time may create a *hidden curriculum* such as the narrow, sequential approach so prevalent in history and math instruction.

I am most persuaded by everything Whitehead says, but the pure process classroom is a classroom without clocks and calendars which suggests that they can't exist in their purest form until Western Civilization abandons its entire chain of philosophical foundations. This will not happen in my lifetime. There will always be problems with application because process philosophy was not conceived primarily as a source for instructional methodology. For now, the value of process philosophy may be how it might change individuals first, who will in time, recast institutions. By rethinking our rank in this world, we affect the nature and quality of our interactions with the earth and all its living beings. Whitehead's vision multiplies the dimensions and value of every life.

Most appealing to me is Whitehead's (1967) insistence that the ultimate goal of all learning is *wisdom.* "An education which does not begin by evoking initiative and end by encouraging it must be wrong" (p. 37). Although a scientist, Alfred North Whitehead elevates art as a cure for spiritual blindness. Although a scientist, he chooses the term *religious education* to convey the importance, vitality and

reverence that must accompany all learning. When smaller minds would build walls, Whitehead unites seemingly divergent elements constituting our world.

Philosophy of Paulo Freire Pertinent to This Study

Paulo Freire's (1990), Pedagogy of the Oppressed, is both educational theory and a handbook for political radicalization. Paulo Freire acknowledges no walls separating the classroom from the larger community. For him, it is impossible to examine the process of education without also examining relationships of power. As Donald Macedo (1994), a student of Freire, states in Literacies of Power, "the very act of viewing education as neutral and devoid of politics is, in fact, a political act" (p. 15). To be educated is to be an empowered individual whose thoughts and actions are consciously synchronized in praxis.

> Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot be reduced to either verbalism or activism. (p.107)

Glorifying democracy is farcical when some people are silenced, dominated, or excluded from society's dialog. Freire's (1999) view suggests that no matter how benevolent and loving Dewey's (1990) idealized teacher might be in this situation, he would be ineffective because freedom cannot be bestowed; it is no one's gift to give. Therefore, issues of educational reform can never be confined to classrooms; they are manifested in the very structure of our institutions.

Paulo Freire (1999) makes an observation about the narrative quality present in too much of our education. When the teacher is the narrator, filling the student

with words to parrot back, there is no transforming power given to the student. Although Dewey (1990) never used the phrase "transforming power," he, too, warned about the negative effects of such exclusively teacher-centered education. Under such circumstances, meek students (passive receptacles) are often labeled the best students. The most creative element of narrative education is that the student collects and catalogs the information they store. However, even during this exercise the student has based categories upon knowledge also gained passively. The ultimate tragedy of this approach (also called *the banking metaphor* by Freire since the currency of knowledge is a gift to be stored unexamined by the student) is that these students don't fully develop a critical consciousness. Rather than becoming transformers, they remain automatons. Such students remain the property of their oppressors, unwilling and unable to examine the reality of their powerlessness.

Freire's (1999) goal for education is to make everyone involved in an educational setting, simultaneously teacher and student. Freire allows that not all people use the banking approach knowingly, but the dehumanizing effect is the same for all. Actions driven by such a mindset separate human beings from their world. "The individual is a spectator, not a re-creator" (p. 56). To maintain the unequal balance of power, education's goal becomes making people *fit* in a world of inequality, maintaining the distance between teacher and student. "Oppression - overwhelming control - is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life"(p. 58). Because the desire to act responsibly is a natural urge, when frustrated some oppressed persons respond by identifying with the oppressive group or with a charismatic leader to vicariously feel freedom. If education is only an exercise in

domination, then it can never share power nor free its students. "Nor may revolutionary society inherit these methods from an oppressor society" (p. 59).

Freire (1999) suggests that one step toward liberating education is to utilize true dialogue (problem posing, problem solving) in the classroom. Dialogue forces connection with other people and with the world. In such a setting, no one owns the process of learning. Problem posing education stresses the transformational character of learning and life, defining both as ongoing processes. "Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to be, it must become" (p. 65). Growth is future bound and, therefore, hopeful and revolutionary. To understand the power of problem posing education, one must understand the *word's* dimensions of reflection and action. These two dimensions must be present in the *true word* to make educational dialogue revolutionary, liberating, and transforming. "By naming the world [we] transform it" (p.69). And by extension, we transform ourselves because we are infused with love, discouraging us from becoming like our oppressors. Dialogue "cannot exist without humility, [it] cannot be an act of arrogance" (p. 71).

The education Freire(1999) envisions requires trust and faith in mankind's innate goodness. Authentic education is mediated by both parties. Understanding, like freedom, cannot be bestowed; rather it emerges from mutual awareness prodded by challenge and contradiction to older ways and visions. As Freire notes, "I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me" (p. 89). Additionally, for true dialogue to occur the language of the educator must reflect the "structural condition in which the thought and language of the [student is] dialectically framed" (p. 77). This sense of place and history must be taken into account because humans,

as conscious beings, are aware of themselves and the world. Their beliefs concerning this relationship determine an individual's concepts about limits and freedom. "By stimulating 'perception of the previous perception' and 'knowledge of the previous knowledge,' decoding stimulates the appearance of a new perception and development of a new knowledge" (p. 96). Our sense of ourselves cannot be separated from our sense of the world. Education can challenge oppressive visions but the oppressed must participate in their own liberation by first transforming the visions that enslave them.

Being a product of Western tradition where rationality is often pitted against emotionalism and spirituality, it doesn't seem persuasive to say my best proof for the validity of Paulo Freire's (1999) thesis is that it simply *feels* right. However, I think Freire might accept that as reason enough. To embrace his observations and solutions requires no demeaning rationalization nor paternalistic pandering. He defines growth (life) as an endless process of renewal that begins within the individual pure heart and is invigorated through dialogue with all the things and creatures of this earth. Whether we are the oppressor or the oppressed, it is an unnatural human state. Whatever our place in the largest scheme, in some capacity we are all someone else's oppressor. Oddly, the temporal status or perceived privilege resulting from such unearned and unnatural power is also the source of our unhappiness. We free ourselves when we make others free. Nurturing heartfelt respect for the rights, value, and dignity of all things and creatures while surrendering our false position as a controller of this creation, heals the fractured, disjointed nature of every life. We are not meant to be merely *in* the world; we are meant to be *of* the world.

Freire's (1999) vision is simple in theory but complex in application. Freedom is never completely and forever attained. Rather, living *free* requires constant questioning, introspection, re-evaluation as we move through this world as gracefully as we are able, seeking ever more connections with our fellow beings. If you accept that all earthly things are of equal worth, the inevitable conclusion is that you love yourself best when you love others. You live most fully when you allow all others to live free. It takes Paulo Freire a book length manuscript to say this not because it requires convoluted logic to justify, but because the ramifications of applying the philosophy are so revolutionary. The societies we construct and our histories as inhabitants of this sphere are ample evidence of the conflicting instincts that interfere with hearing the simple truths we carry deep in our hearts. If one looks at all the inequities and corruption in our world, it is tempting to call for anarchy to wipe the slate clean. However, we need our institutions because whether they take the form of a small tribal clan or this nation's federal bureaucracy, they were all born from man's desire for community. We resist massive and abrupt change not because we believe our institutions are perfect but because our vision is so stunted and our fear of no community is so great. We change the world by first changing ourselves. Meaningful revolutions begin with a single changed heart and mind. I don't believe that corruption can stand in the presence of enough pure hearts. Real change is incremental, and even imperfect institutions like our public schools can be agents for real and meaningful change taking us toward Paulo Freire's ideal.

Philosophy of Maxine Greene Pertinent to This Study

Maxine Greene (1988) would not disagree with John Dewey's avowed goals for connected, active life-long learning, or even with his desire for democracy and freedom. She allows that knowledge is anything that helps us know ourselves and our world. She encourages the kind of continual, reflective inquiry and responsibility that connect us to our fellow beings. In these ways, she is in agreement with Dewey. I doubt that she would oppose Alfred North Whitehead's expansion of those principles to emphasize the spirit as much as the mind in our efforts to spark our student's lives. However, Greene seems most skeptical that the current social environment and structures of power accommodate what we publicly say we want all people to accomplish. Does our current democracy function as inclusively as our most privileged and powerful citizens claim? In 1988's The Dialectic of Freedom, Maxine Greene observes, " 'We are free,' [Dewey] said, 'not because we statically are, but in so far as we are becoming different from what we have been'...It is not only a matter of the capacity to choose; it is a matter of the power to act to attain one's purposes" (p. 4). Before Dewey's democratic vision can be realized, we must understand that security and freedom are not the same thing; that the conformist, materialistic goals of capitalism are not the same as Dewey's vision of democratic freedom. An education for freedom must move beyond function, beyond subordination of persons to external ends. It must move beyond mere performance to action, which entails the taking of initiatives" (p.133). For Maxine Greene, our schools should not be factories of conformity but the *public spaces* where diverse voices are heard. "We are realizing how much the negotiation of identity today has to

do with connectedness and membership; and the notion of participant membership has to feed into our conceptions of democratic citizenship" (Greene, 1997, p. 4). Without actual freedom and power (meaning the ability to choose and act upon those choices), the victimized learn to substitute *negative freedom* (withdrawal from responsibility) for social interaction. If Greene (1988) is correct in her assertion that freedom can occur only within the context of community and connectedness, then Dewey's vision for inclusive democracy remains a dream. That does not mean, however, that there is no hope. Even if broken in a hundred other ways, the mere ability regularly to gather so many children from dissimilar backgrounds suggests that our schools could become public spaces "where persons can appear before one another as who they are and what they can do" (p.133). If we truly want our children to be free, then schools cannot allow themselves to be dispensers of uniform, pre-fabricated dreams. "Visions of public spaces may open, if we allow them to, spaces where all kinds of persons can come together in collaborative concern for what is lacking and what is wrong, what needs to be improved or repaired" (Greene, 1997, p. 5). The type of reform needed to lead us toward a productive community of whole persons as envisioned by Dewey and Whitehead and Greene will not necessarily require more textbooks, testing materials or electronic products. It will, however, require shared power which might be a greater cost than some are willing to bear.

Philosophy of Nel Noddings Pertinent to This Study

Educator Nel Noddings (1993), because of her consistent concern for the *whole* child, offers many suggestions to keep the teacher equally focused on human

beings and subject matter. At one point Noddings uses the term *transformational feminism* to describe empowering relationships.

> It seeks to transform the social world into a place where all human beings can pursue self-affirmation responsibility. Power is involved, of course. If we seek to empower, we use some of our own power to help others acquire the power they need to exercise some control over their own lives...The aim is to distribute power so that all persons can attain a reasonable level of efficacy and so that greater attention can be given to other aspects of human life. (p.156)

While some would allow that this might be desirable in the *real world,* they see it as an invitation to chaos in a classroom. For Palmer (1998), "In a culture of technique, we often confuse authority with power, but the two are not the same. Power works from the outside in, but authority works from inside out" (p. 31). People's fears are due in part to a misunderstanding of actual classroom dynamics. As Noddings (1999) points out, "The flow of information is bidirectional. The student needs information about what the school offers; the teacher needs information about the student in order to guide him or her effectively" (p. 581).

Noddings (1993) also suggests teachers employ a *constructivist* cognitive view. "Constructivists believe that people are internally motivated and that they construct their own mental representations of situations, events, and conceptual structures" (p.158). This encourages inventiveness and involvement with the students' needs and actions, challenging them, offering suggestions to help them making useful constructions. Throughout her discussion, Noddings (1999) cautions that the teacher

must responsibly guide the process to make discovery helpful and honest in terms of the student's experience. "We want to encourage free and honest discussion, but we should avoid messages that destroy hope and induce cynicism. Some forms of radical pedagogy are too one-sided and leave students with the notion that everything about their nation and their schooling is but a myth" (p. 584). A teacher who empowers students does not abdicate responsibility for helping students learn standard forms because the ultimate goal is freedom in both the *public* and private lives of the students.

As Howard Gardner (in Souders, et al., 1983) sees it, "The contextual learning approach provides an alternative means of meeting student learning needs. Contextual learning recognizes that learning is a complex process that cannot be addressed adequately through drill-oriented, stimulus/response methodologies" (p. 39). Sadly, although it is possible for a single teacher and her class to develop a caring, freeing atmosphere after great effort, there is currently an escalating dissonance from outside whose only lasting effects are destructive. For Greene (2000), "Another challenge to the freedom to choose can be found in the new preoccupation with testing. It should be clear, for all the arguments in favor of testing, that the imposition of tests that determine young people's academic future far too often erodes the teacher's freedom, since, too frequently, the teacher feels forced to 'teach the test,' thus altering the climate of a classroom" (p.10). Such limited, imposed learning goals can reduce the best-intentioned teacher to employing mind-numbing, trivial memorization exercises since that is what too much of standardized testing demands. Although, as Langer (1997) points out, it has long been known that

"memorizing is a strategy for taking in material that has no personal meaning" (p. 69), it is still a worthy objective to much of society.

Perhaps one of Noddings' (1999) more controversial suggestions for school reform is that curriculums should be rich with electives to accommodate the uniqueness of individual interests and needs rather than laden with ever more levels of *solid* subjects. The current standards movement has resulted in an ever-increasing list of required subjects, assuming more of the same will replace yesterday's record of failure with excellence. Critics of her approach claim that because students can't possibly know the direction of their future lives, letting them graduate from high school with less than a college preparatory background is unfairly limiting their options. Her thoughtful answer to such assertions is,

> Because we live in a credentialed society, students who have chosen nontraditional courses may find themselves *unprepared* for immediate entry into college, but the power they have acquired in controlling their own studies should make it relatively easy for them to gain the further preparation required. (p.581)

Noddings (1999) thinks the good that comes from trust and empowerment outweighs the damage done by forcing material beyond their immediate interests and abilities. Again, her emphasis is that curriculum content should be a tool for personal growth rather than an obstacle. Noddings even claims that they are better prepared for the actual work of college than many of those taking approved courses. "If we are looking for a national disgrace, it is not to be found in the fact that too few students take *rigorous* courses but rather in the fact that so many take them and learn so little

from them" (p. 581). She further qualifies her position with the admission that teachers can't pretend that credentials don't matter when so many powerful segments of society think they do. Instead she would be certain that students taking non-traditional programs understand the possible social consequences of their choices. She would also pressure colleges to experiment with admittance policies concerning non-traditional backgrounds. "Changing one's mind, one's occupation, one's way of life is enormously attractive in a liberal democracy. Schooling should reflect this cherished privilege" (p. 582).

Existentialist Philosophy Pertinent to This Study

According to Dufrenne (in Wagar, 1967) nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was the first writer to call himself an existentialist. Protesting the status of pawn ascribed mankind by Hegel, Kierkegaard embraced the subjectivity of his own rational being in reaction against any philosophical system that limited his life by objectifying it. Existentialism is a slippery, inexact label that has since been applied to many writers and philosophers, even when they don't apply it to themselves. Its rejection of universal, objective standards discourages attempted definition. As Stevenson (1987) sees it, despite the range of lives called existentialist, there are at least three evident core concerns: *individuality*, *meaning*, and *freedom*.

Enlightenment from concrete, individual experience is favored over general theories that ignore the uniqueness of every person. Existentialists are less interested in scientific or metaphysical universal truths than in the meanings of their own lives, their purpose, as discovered through reflective living. A third concern of existentialists is the freedom of individuals. Additionally, the only *authentic* life is

one that is chosen by the individual. The only demand is to live your truth and to persuade others about your vision. It is a philosophy that is broad enough in application that it can accommodate both "the atheism of Sartre and the religious thoughts of Marcel and Buber"(Brown, et al, 1998, p. 212). From this framework although the world is a *given*, there can be no objective description of that world. "There is no fixed essence to which human beings have to conform in order to qualify as human beings; we are what we decide to be"(p. 213). Without the comforting anchor of an objective reality, the extremes of individual truth can determine the world to be an angst-ridden prison of loneliness or a celebration of limitless connections with the universe. With this feature of interpretative elasticity, it is in the mainstream of twentieth century thought "and contributes significantly to the replacement of the Cartesian inheritance which has dominated philosophy for the last three centuries" (p. 213).

Few people live with the reflective intensity of a trained philosopher like Kierkegaard, but it may be his rebellion against degradation of individual lives that continues to resonate so strongly. In varying forms, existentialist principles are woven throughout the pronouncements of many of our most vocal educators and reformers. Perhaps weary of modernist production approaches to education, they also seek to re-affirm individuality, meaning, and freedom. Many career educators have long considered their work a vocation more than a profession. Even when pay and public respect were at their lowest, there were teachers who stayed only because their work held meaning for them and the source of that meaning was the variety and

richness of the relationships it afforded with their students. As Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1983) wrote nearly twenty years ago:

> So a compelling dimension of a good high school is the fearless regard of adolescents...Most good high school teachers seem unafraid of these young people who tend to baffle and offend the rest of us...I think it reflects their intimate and deep knowledge of adolescence as a developmental period; their understanding of individuals. (pp.343-344)

Although many teachers are reflective personalities by nature, the institutional mechanics of public schools are rarely conducive to the kind of contemplation that could keep it bearable. A school can be disconnected curriculums, overcrowding, and an atmosphere hurried by passing bells that whisk needy students too soon from our care daily. At times, even the most dedicated can be overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. Parker J. Palmer (1998) describes the core dilemma of teaching this way:

> As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart – and the more one loves teaching, the more heart breaking it can be. (p. 11)

Palmer's (1998) solution for present pain is to reconnect with the past. He suggests that when a teacher loses heart, remembering an earlier mentor can restore some sense of purpose. For me, Palmer's suggestion is of limited help. A sense of history can comfort and give perspective, but the source of the hurting is losing

students today. It is in the existential tenets of self and freedom that we best find meaning. When we cease depending on our knowledge to save us and begin again with what we *believe*, real change is possible. Maxine Greene (1995) draws an important distinction between knowledge and belief when she says, "Rather than seek out a theory of truth we simply affirm an ethical base for the value of cooperative human inquiry...we articulate what we believe and what we share" (p. 69). Oddly, for an occupation inundated with texts and graphs and facts, a teacher can see most clearly when other ways of knowing are employed:

> Those who demand a rendering of 'things exactly as they are' often assume an objective reality that can and should be precisely captured. To use imagination is to summon up an 'as/if', to look at things as if they could be otherwise. This does not deny firm evidence of what is 'real' and 'true.' It does however enable us to break with the one-dimensional vision, to look towards what might or what ought to be. (1995, p. 1)

As existentialist notions of self and freedom gain currency in educational debate, the issues of student rights and autonomy come to the forefront. According to LeCapitaine (1999), "All persons can have the opportunity to grow and to develop, positively, through the various personal and psychological constructs. Children can, in essence, begin to construct and to develop their own emotions (yes, even happiness), moral/ethical reasoning, cognition, ego identity, etc., and I believe this to be much more critical than academic achievement" (p. 119). When teachers turn their attention to identifying and dealing with the real needs of children, not the ones listed by some outside bureaucrat, we can truly begin to serve our students. And through

serving them in courageous ways, we can regain our lost sense of purpose. We need what Fletcher (2000) calls "a commitment to thinking and acting as if we truly believed that our own success as individuals depended on the success of our community" (p. 178).

The classroom is the core of our community. A teacher radicalized by such ideas cannot teach in traditional ways. Inevitably, institutional goals will clash with what is most empowering for the student because teaching is about relationships and not test scores. It is not about the standardization of lives. As Greene (2000) puts it,

> Then there is the renewed emphasis upon uniform standards, too often a denial of everything we have learned about diversity and multiplicity. Important though standards are, important as are norms and a sense of ideal possibility, the notion of uniform standards in a moment of unprecedented diversity cannot but erode the teacher's choices among alternative approaches to pedagogy. (p. 10)

One criticism of existentialist-based teaching philosophies is the fear that emphasizing non-academic needs of students will detract from the informational and academic skills content. Taken to an extreme, it would have this effect. However, the intention of the attitudinal shift is to widen the student's context for knowledge. Mastery should come more easily, more efficiently, when negotiated between teacher and student because the importance of the material and value of application is firmly established and personalized beforehand. Grossman, et al. (2001) point out that:

> We want to help [our students] find the value of reflecting on critical issues, examining their thinking, and giving serious consideration to an idea or

> opinion, so that they can refine their practices and continually grow in understanding. Simply reflecting on a problem, possibly one of the most common uses of teacher reflection, is not our only, or even our primary, goal of reflection. Students must have content on which to focus their thinking. (p. 236)

When approached this way, classrooms don't become *therapy sessions,* but more efficient learning environments precisely because the differing learning strengths and weakness of the class are openly confronted. It is not an excuse to teach less, but it requires a teacher to ask *what will I teach, how will I teach it, and why will I teach it.* There is no evidence that mindlessly cramming a course with more material increases learning.

A common strand of existentialist-based teaching is gentle strength and a singular goal to empower children to find their happiness. Maxine Greene (1993) expresses that hope this way:

> Perhaps by means of looking through diverse perspectives at the same books, the same environment, the same world, young persons will constitute something in common among themselves. Their teachers can make the materials, the ways of knowing available and accessible. They may then go on, teachers and learners, through and beyond the overture, taking their lives seriously, resisting thoughtfulness, renewing a world. (p. 6)

During my review of literature concerning the experience of valuable learning, often the most poignant insight came from works that were the least formally academic. During my search, one of the best testaments I encountered to

teaching as reflective activity and to the general worth of heuristic research methodology was the memoir of Robert Inchausti. His 1993 book, Spitwad Sutras: Classroom Teaching as Sublime Vocation, contains shared epiphanies for the experienced teacher and hope for the beginner. Few have described the vocation of teacher/learner better than Inchausti when he observes:

> The difficulty of teaching does not stem from its complexity, but rather from the fact that it demands total surrender and total vigilance. It is not an intellectual activity so much as a moral and perceptual one. That is why some of the best teachers are not necessarily the best thinkers. Their genius resides in their capacity to invest so much significant attention to their subjects that the outer world just disappears. They possess a capacity to give their lessons such intellectual urgency that the conventional life loses all its appeal, and students enter into the bliss of pure philosophical absorption. Like a classic work, great teachers fascinate, not by their glamour or flash, but by their intensity, by their focus, and by the personal worth of their ideas and themes. (p. 168)

Summary

This chapter suggests a lack of published, formal research concerning the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective. It offered descriptions of a current social context that both discourages such research while demonstrating the need to better understand the phenomenon of valuable learning. Brief summaries of the educational philosophy and theory pertinent to the study were

presented to aid the reader during evaluation of the research design, methodology, and gathered data.

Chapter 3

This chapter will outline the need for this study which seeks to answer the research question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? I will then offer a brief explanation of how my research became centered on this inquiry. After an explication of the general principles of the heuristic research method, I will discuss the particular elements of Clark Moustakas's research design as utilized in this study. The population of this investigation will be described as will the procedures for collecting and analyzing data. Finally, I will describe how the data will be synthesized and presented.

Need and Background of the Study

The embattled public school system is still the single, greatest social commonality in a nation that is increasingly fragmented and class conscious. Whatever our differences, the majority of Americans are usually both products and patrons of the public schools. Our schools, for all their imperfections, help maintain a fragile network of interconnectedness that we should not be too anxious to discard. Our nation's schools are certainly ripe for reform, but not the kind that shouts down from a mountaintop. Too much current reform is weighted in favor of increased liberal arts requirements and exit testing.

My objections to such actions are not based in anti-intellectualism, but the belief they restrict the variety of outcomes and severely limit the number of students whose futures are enhanced by public education. Weighting educational improvements exclusively towards college preparatory makes our schools even less effective and more irrelevant to the majority of students whose talents and dreams lie

beyond the scope of a typical liberal arts curriculum. With too many curriculum *improvements*, not only can the usefulness of the knowledge and skill base become restricted to college (like style analysis or trigonometry), but underachieving students are sent the implicit message that they, their accomplishments, and their dreams are inferior.

By weighting public education's scope to serving a perceived elite, other types of knowing and human experience are discounted. Additionally, failure for too many students is institutionalized while cheating them out of exposure to knowledge, strategies, and timely emotional support that could help them envision and live productive futures. My experience with students who are not adept at standardized testing suggests that their dreams are as plenteous as their needs and *deficiencies*. Society cannot afford to consider these students as the expendable few. Increasingly, they are the majority. Possibly, the true aberrations in school are the students whom are most coddled and showered with honors; the ones who thrive in what has become the traditional high school classroom, those who are capable of storing and recalling isolated minutia with all the emotional commitment of a computer. If a diploma is to be more than a certificate of endurance, then we must re-examine what we choose to teach our children. If indeed there can be a national consensus about the factual core knowledge necessary to function in our society, then testing instruments should be grounded in that material and the chaff trimmed. There is a role for student and teacher accountability but we must recognize how little of a person was measured by last Friday's science quiz. A student scoring in the ninetieth percentile on an exam composed of true/false and multiple choice questions may indeed be knowledgeable

or merely an extremely skillful test taker. Society's greatest fear should be that this overachiever possesses an education that has reduced his or her vision of the world to one so rote and dichotomous that the performance might be seen as tragic rather than triumphant.

Before deciding what and how to teach, the experience of valuable learning must be understood. What do we need to know about ourselves and our students to become effective learners? Are there considerations that increase the likelihood of diversity and viability in the futures we envision? What are the *lessons* that stay with us and enhance our existence throughout a lifetime? Previous attempts to determine curriculum goals for education have been made by people distanced from the daily task of public learning. This study will probe the understanding and experiences of students and teachers, past and present. Heuristic methodology will be employed not because it should be considered superior to other methodologies, but because of its appropriateness to this quest for understanding. Since heuristic research recognizes additional ways of knowing untapped in other types of studies, it may lead to unique and useful insight. Asking the participants and products of the educational process is necessary to inform future reform.

Heuristic Research Methodology

The particular model of heuristic research adopted for this study is based upon Clarke Moustakas' (1990) book, Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications. His methodology can be related in relatively few words, although the implications and application of his design are broad and arduous. Preceding the presentation of Moustakas' model is a necessary (albeit sometimes meandering)

challenge to exclusive *correctness* often accorded quantitative research at the expense of all other ways of knowing. This is not an apology for the heuristic method, but prompted by a perceived lack of respect for methodologies not grounded in the same sense of reality. As noted by Smith (1995), "the very scientific status of *social science* itself [is questioned.] Despite sharing a rationalist, materialistic and reductionist epistemology with the *hard* sciences, social sciences have traditionally been considered soft in part because of their failure to produce models with a high degree of predictive power" (p. 35). Qualitative research is a marked return of emphasized *context* to the realm of scientific inquiry. Fleener (2002) observes,

> With the mathematization of science, removal of context, and the focus on being, scientific methodology fundamentally changed. Scientific methodology became both empirical/testable and abstract/mathematical. Formal relationships, represented mathematically, could be explored. Mathematics became both the mode of abstraction and the means of predictive calculation and confirmation. Because of mathematization of reality, the world, so perceived, and all of nature became quantifiable, predictable, and controllable. (p. 41)

In other words, the metaphors chosen to describe the world determine how we see the world. Because the mathematical and mechanistic metaphors of the modernist age are so entrenched in our culture and language, they are persuasive even when not consciously employed. In the opinion of Cutright (1999), we "are almost certain to consider organizations heavily or exclusively within machine-similar frameworks, with attendant strengths and weaknesses of those metaphors" (p. 5). Similar to the

default setting on a computer, when confronted with an unfamiliar situation, we too often return to what is already known rather than see it for the revelation it is.

I do not dismiss the usefulness or integrity of all quantitative research; I question only its appropriateness in all intellectual quests. My bias is that the persuasiveness accorded much quantitatively based research stems from an attendant assumption that results are valid only when they are harbored within the boundaries of a prescribed, uniform and universal reality. From my viewpoint, measures such as *cleaning data* of outlying extremes before completing calculations are not proof of objectivity. Rather, such procedures, however exactingly complex, can reduce research to an exercise in reinforcing pre-existing descriptions of reality. Rather than attempting to describe the particular reality that confronts an individual researcher, the outcome has been predetermined and is considered successful because it reflects what was already thought to be. Similarly, using a hammer and saw, the pieces of any jigsaw puzzle can be fitted without attention to the nuances of color, tonality, shading, line or even shape. With enough effort, all parts can be forced into the frame's rectangular boundaries but the finished, fractured image bears little resemblance to the puzzle's guiding illustration on the box cover.

The short story "In the Penal Colony" by Franz Kafka (1919) describes a torture machine that has outlived its usefulness in the new world. It has fallen from fashion among the powerful elite who sent a representative to determine the machine's fate. The New Commandant soon is convinced the outsider's mind is closed to all arguments for maintaining the machine. In a last effort to protect the name and heritage of the Old Commandant's vision (as embodied in the machine of his design),

the New Commandant offers his own execution as the ultimate proof of the machine's perfect justice. As he is strapped in and the gears begin to turn, the New Commandant admonishes the outsider to *be just* and tell the world what he has seen. What the outsider witnesses is not the promised exhibition of enlightenment, but a display of barbaric mutilation as the poorly maintained machine of faulty design self-destructs during operation. The grisly outcome confirmed the outsider's belief in the moral correctness of his judgment and his worst reservations about the machine. However, what was most mystifying to the outsider was the corpse's expression, discovered only after the body was pulled from the wreckage. Rather than a contorted expression of surprise and terror that reasonably could be expected, the Commandant's face was an unlined vision of absolute peace and absolution.

This (perhaps extreme) analogy between quantitative research and Kafka's torture machine is meant to illustrate that philosophical assumptions define our separate realities and how we interact with the world. To a *non-believer*, the positivist methods reflected in quantitative research are relics of the modernist era. In the realm of quantitative investigation, a researcher's objectivity is the basis for claims of reliability. In a postmodern sense, objective reality is an illusion. From an existentialist perspective, (which is compatible with heuristic research) subjective truth is all that can be known. Further, from these perspectives, positivist assumptions are every bit as tyrannical and barbaric as Kafka's machine because they diminish the significance of a single spirit's awareness, choices, and actions.

Heuristic research is not non-research or anti-research, but it is does assert that absolute objectivity is an impossibility. The mere presence of the researcher both

affects the object of inquiry and it, in turn, affects the researcher. It shouldn't be a matter of pitting research techniques against each other, but acknowledging that they value different information and utilize different information sources. Neither can replicate what the other offers. Although they are both methodologies for inquiry about the nature of our existence, they spring from vastly different senses of reality. In the heuristic methodology these are subjective, not objective, realities. The epistemological basis for heuristic methodology is Michael Polanyi's (1969) description of tacit knowledge and his belief that "all knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge [making] a wholly explicit knowledge...unthinkable" (p. 144). Contrasted with positivist approaches, heuristic research is ontologically perspective-seeking rather than truth-seeking. Polanyi explains that his "definition of reality...implies the presence of an indeterminate range of anticipations in any knowledge bearing on reality. But besides this indeterminacy of its prospects, tacit knowing may contain also an actual knowledge that is indeterminate, in the sense that its content cannot be explicitly stated" (p. 141).

This is not to imply respect only for tacit knowledge. Do I want a surgeon to operate on my faulty heart guided only by inarticulate *feelings* and no factual knowledge base of anatomy? Of course not. On the other hand, I would hope that in an emergency situation, my surgeon would be skillful enough to employ fact-informed intuition when routine procedures and machines fail. Polanyi does not say that nothing can be known, he says that more extensive understanding is only possible by considering relationships and wholeness and viewer perspective.

Contrasted with qualitative approaches, which heuristic methodology is axiologically, quantitative research is often given credit for greater understanding than it actually provides. For example, consider a television rating service that gathers data using *objective*, electronic monitoring systems from a representative sample of 1000 viewing families. If meant to establish which programs are most popular for the sake of advertising dollars, its data is incomplete and results misleading if it only establishes whether a TV set was on or off and which programs the household set was tuned into during which hours. Unless the data can additionally establish precisely who watched the show (adults, children, the family dog?) or whether the television was merely providing white noise as background for other family activities, it is not providing truly insightful information about viewing habits. Knowing that a set is on doesn't describe who watched the entire program or why certain individuals chose to continue or abandoned the program. If the show is taped for later viewing, can advertisers assume that their commercials will not be victims of a fast forward or mute button? Even if the rating service uses a written log to supplement electronic monitoring, the assumption is that logs will be completed accurately. If responses are gathered using a multiple-choice format to facilitate number crunching, can the choices describe all the possible situations? Even the most detailed surveys must be suspect since they predetermine the outcome by limiting possible responses and *other* provides no useful information except that the data is incomplete.

In the realm of human existence, suspect television ratings are not a worthy concern. However, limited financial and human resources for education are being

apportioned and inequities institutionalized based on research just as questionable. Justified by unexamined faith in *hard* science's vision of universal truth, ***unbiased*** numbers are primary agents for restructuring our schools and hence individual lives. Is any single test actually a valuable measure of the person taking it? Does any test accurately describe everything that has been taught or learned? Can anyone reasonably believe that all test scores reflect an individual's absolutely best effort? Unless a student is motivated by test scores (and tying results to a credit or even graduation does not assure this) results don't necessarily represent more than a connect-the-dots exercise to a student who would rather sleep, the anxiety from a morning fight with parents, a student's self-loathing because he doesn't *get* math, or anguish over grandma's terminal cancer. Even with such awareness, my own classroom exam results must be tempered by the context of my students' lives. If I discover that one of my students had exams in three classes that day and took time to study only for two tests because they were *doing okay* in my English class but needed to improve their algebra and history grade, how confident can I be about the data? The best I hope for is to establish a profile informed by varying types of testing over a longer period of time. My point is that objectivity is not something accomplished easily or automatically by adopting a particular procedure. The impossible claim for quantitatively based research and testing is that it is objective and reflects universal reality.

Qualitative research attempts to put a *face* to the numbers and enhances validity with rich contextual description and interviews. Heuristic research might employ interviews also, although they would be examined for themes rather than

systematically coded. However, rather than declare differences between itself and other positivist approaches, classic qualitative research often imitates elements of hard science with such features as a more rigid methodology, the use of questionnaires, and data tables. I have chosen the heuristic methodology because it affords a greater number of options for gathering and analyzing data. I am not certain that I could answer the question that intrigues me any other way.

As defined by Moustakas (1990) heuristic research "refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience...The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self- awareness and self-knowledge" (p. 9). Unlike other methods, heuristic research not only encourages the researcher to be involved with the research process, it demands such engagement. "The heuristic process is autobiographic, for virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social - and perhaps universal - significance"(p. 15). It values self-dialog and intuition based on Michael Polanyi's (1983) concept of tacit knowing: "We can know more than we can tell..." (p. 4). Heuristic research assumes that the answers we seek are knowable and reflected in all the things that surround us. This implies a *good fit* since my research is perspective-seeking rather than Truth-seeking. Goals for this study include both self-awareness and avenues for social and educational reform.

The stages of heuristic research as outlined by Moustakas (1990) are: *Initial Engagement* - the task of isolating an "intense interest, a passionate concern...an inner search to discover the topic and question" (p. 27). *Immersion* - becoming "alert to all

possibilities for meaning and enters fully into life with others wherever the theme is being expressed" (p. 28). This concept expands the sources for data to chance conversations, art, films, formal interviews, virtually anywhere that the topic is reflected. *Incubation* - a process of growth resulting from momentarily retreating from concentrated focus on the question, allowing tacit knowing and "intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness" (p. 29). *Illumination* - "when the researcher is in a receptive state of mind without conscious striving or concentration, the insight or modification occurs" (p. 29). *Explication* - "The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning...The researcher explicates the major components of the phenomenon, in detail, and is now ready to put them together into a whole experience" (p. 31). *Creative Synthesis* - when the researcher moves "beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit(s) an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realized" (p. 32).

The subjective flavor of the method's description and Moustakas' novel terminology might cause some to doubt the rigor of this research style, but that would be a mistake. I understand Moustakas' core assumptions to be: we know more than we can express and much of this knowledge is embodied within us and stored tacitly. Through immersion, incubation, and shifts in focus, illumination is possible. My personal writing suggests that the approach is valid. For instance, I have written of childhood experiences and am aware that the richest writing I have ever done was

completed in relatively short time (a few hours) while maintaining a nearly trance-like state. Through the use of a *totem* such as a photograph, a childhood toy, or an evocative piece of music played again and again, essentially I have been able to stretch time and *re-live* a remembered moment. The result is a flood of sensory detail retrieved from tacitly stored memory. Often a new perspective develops regarding an instant that otherwise would have remained lost, unexamined in my memory. But these products are merely vignettes and not the sustained stream-of-consciousness exercises produced by literary masters like James Joyce. However, it is this kind of Joycean discipline that Moustakas' technique demands. The heuristic method is not something that can be relegated to bouts of weekend writing. Rather it is sustaining a *raw* sensory and mental state for an extended period of time, being constantly open and emotionally vigilant to all the truth the world is offering.

Population

In the largest sense of heuristic research, the population for this study is any and all individuals I am currently in contact with or individuals from my past who can inform me about the experience of valuable learning. Heuristic research allows that the study's population be expanded to include even persons I have not met but who offer insight I can gather though accounts in the printed and electronic media. In a practical sense, my research will *begin* with co-researchers who are presently students, teachers, administrators, and community citizens connected to the high school where I currently teach. Institutional Review Board approval required that my co-researchers be at least 18 years of age, so not all current students will be involved.(Appendix) My place of employment is the smallest of three city high

schools (with a current enrollment of 800) and located in a southwestern city of approximately 100,000. My inquiry is not restricted to current students or employees; I expect the circle of co-researchers to grow as lead by the research.

Procedure

As suggested by Moustakas, I stated the focus of my inquiry in the form of a single question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? Formulating the question resulted from *initial engagement*. The deliberate wording of the question is meant to encourage exploration of the qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of the learning phenomenon. The term *valuable learning* was chosen to discourage understandings based on quantitative measurements; information that is predictive or concerned with causal relationships. Most importantly, my personal need to explore this question was (and remains) vital and driven by a lifetime of experience and wonder about the phenomenon of learning.

The next step of *immersion* was accommodated by several strategies. For myself as the primary researcher, the most prominent tool was a formal, daily log where conversations, bits of news reports, classroom incidents, and any other chance data that caught my interest were recorded during the sustained period of *immersion*. I made no attempt to edit or predict the future relevance of entries, rather I trusted the tacit processes at work. Periodically, entries were re-read and written reflection recorded suggesting connections, insights, additional information sources, and further questions.

Participants beyond myself in this study are referred to as *co-researchers*. Because as the primary researcher, I attempt to understand the essence of the

phenomenon as it is revealed through their experiences. I accept their experience as equal to mine in terms of importance and validity. To engage my study's co-researchers, I began by interviewing students, teachers, and parents using prepared questions meant to steer them toward the subject of *valuable learning*. These interviews were not intended to produce quantitative data; rather they were taped and transcribed for later reflection and to provide context for their responses. Attempting to remain true to the spirit of Moustakas' model (and since I had no interest in quantitative results), the prepared questions often served only as starting points and conversation was allowed to choose its natural path. Additionally, many of my current students contributed. Although they routinely keep journals the entire school year, during the three month period when data were being collected, they were offered topics that related to their experiences with *valuable learning*.

The most difficult step of the heuristic research model proved to be *incubation*, retreating from the data to allow the mind enough time to clarify the significance of the data without consciously attempting to impose meaning. Because data gathering is theoretically endless and on-going, new information is recorded as earlier information *incubates* in anticipation of *illumination* –insight concerning the data's emerging themes.

The last stages of this heuristic research project began with *explication* when I began to fully examine the new consciousness emerging from the data about *valuable learning*. At this point, my journal entries became attempts to fully understand the implications of all that I had seen.

The final step of heuristic research is *creative synthesis* when tacit knowledge and the explicit knowledge are linked by intuition. At this point the inward life of ideas are given conscious form. In this study, my presentation of *creative synthesis* took the form of results written in narrative inquiry style as described by Conle (2000). Ideally, narrative inquiry weaves the resulting information into a story line with an almost conversational tone as it presents a reliable portrait of the data; in this case, a description of the learner's experience of *valuable learning.*

Summary

I began this chapter by summarizing the need for exploring the research question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? Additionally, I outlined the concerns that lead me to this research. Then I explained the development of heuristic methodology and the specific features of Moustakas' research design and the appropriateness of his design for this inquiry. The population of this study was described as well as procedures for collecting, analyzing, and presenting data.

Chapter 4

This research explores the question: What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective? In an effort to remain consistent with the holistic emphasis of heuristic research, I have chosen to analyze my findings as they are presented in this section. The study's original impetus was a personal desire to explore and better understand a teaching career's worth of assumptions and doubt as I sought to know what learning remains useful for a lifetime. My hope is that a better understanding of themes common to descriptions of valuable learning might enable more effective teachers and learners. Additionally, resulting insight may have additional relevance to the current, national debate concerning reform for public education. Too often, those in closest proximity to the process of education - teachers and students - have been excluded from the dialogue about what should be taught and how it should be taught.

Because I assumed that the nature of the data I intended to record would preclude quantitative analysis, I chose to design a qualitative research project. When introduced to heuristic research methodology as formulated by Clarke Moustakas (1990), I was attracted to his emphasis upon individual, internal search as a means of discovering the nature and meaning of a process. Key theoretical justifications of Moustakas' methodology are based in Michael Polanyi's (1969) belief that "we know a comprehensive entity by interiorizing its parts or by making ourselves dwell in them..." (p. 214). Further, Polanyi expands traditional ways of knowing to include tacit knowing which he calls "an act of indwelling by which we gain access to new

meaning...Since all understanding is tacit knowing, all understanding is achieved by indwelling" (p.160).

To provide data for Moustakas' *immersion* stage, I utilized formal and informal interviews with fellow educators and past and present students. Most current learner input was provided by written student journal entries with focused topics. Additionally, I compiled notebooks of current newspaper and magazine articles about educational issues. Personal reflection fueled by conversations, media reports, interviews, student journals, my experience and memories were recorded in my own journal. Of all data producing sources I employed, national media reports proved the least useful. Often, reported problems and suggested solutions seemed conflicting and circular. For instance, members of the nation's teaching force regularly were accused of having an inferior knowledge base as established by certification testing, but common solutions for solving the teacher shortage included having current teachers work outside their major fields and delaying or waiving competency testing for alternatively certified recruits. Problem descriptions and problem solving strategies centered on economic issues. Money drove media discussions more often than learning data or theory. Articles conveyed a sense of anger and urgency but little more. During this study, the majority of *illumination* took place during the process of keeping my own journal. Efforts at Moustakas' phase of *creative synthesis* will be recorded in Chapter 5 while this section is one of *explication*. Although heuristic studies are perspective-seeking rather than truth-seeking, themes and strands of similarity became evident during the research. During the process of explication, my richest data fell into the general categories of physical

descriptions of the learning experience, descriptions of valuable learning from the learner's viewpoint, and descriptions of valuable learning from the teacher's viewpoint.

Findings and Analysis

During this research, I asked students for their verbal and written opinions about school, teachers, and valuable learning. If my goal was to gather succinct and eloquent manifestos, then I failed. But I expected such an approach to fail. Some would suggest that young students are incapable of telling me the things I wanted to know. Generally, I think that is true. Limited experience makes a child's world smaller. Children feel intensely about that which affects them most directly and personalize the world by attributing their emotions to everyone else. On the other hand, tacitly, children also know what is important and true; they know what we all know. Therefore, I chose to let them tell me what they needed to say and allow intuition to guide my exploration between the lines. Actually, even conversations with teachers (although their vocabulary was superior) followed a similar path. Often, *big* questions were answered with platitudes initially, but when given time for *detours*, their individual voices emerged.

For this research, the most expedient way to hear my students' stories was through their written journals. Journals, even when filled with grammatical errors and misspellings, are also filled with genuine emotional truth. They provide many students with a forum for reflection that is focused and cathartic. During a regular school session, the only course work I require

my students to collect and save all year are their weekly journal entries, also known as Weekly Writing Topics (WWT's). Each week students choose two topics from four suggested prompts. The topics are deliberately open-ended to accommodate a variety of interpretations and levels of experience. They are graded only for length (100% for two full pages, 80% for one). Grammar and spelling are not considerations for these assignments. The writer labels one response as *private* and the other as *public*. I write my comments on the private page and we periodically break into small groups and exchange the public writings for their classmates to read and respond to.

During this research's formal period of data gathering, I added topics to my regular list, asking for descriptions of such things as a great or rotten teacher, whether they learned more inside or outside of school, lessons that had changed their life, and what schools needed to be teaching but weren't. As I listened to my students, themes concerning their collective vision of valuable learning became more evident as they told me about struggles within themselves, the importance of family, how schools and teachers affect them and their reflective wisdom about life. The following journal excerpts are presented with grammar and spelling errors intact but names have been changed for issues of privacy. At this point, it also must be noted that the themes identified below are not distinct. They overlap and inclusion of excerpts under more than one heading could be justified. When dealing with a whole life, the multiple motives that drive our words and actions are not easily disentangled.

During this research, valuable data for reflection came from fellow teachers as well as students. I deliberately sought those who taught subjects other than English,

but the most important criterion was their professional reputation. I only engaged educators who appeared to have established extraordinarily strong connections with students. In any school building there is no shortage of negativity and I saw no use in interviewing the defeated. To present these stories, I chose heuristic methodology and to preserve the holistic essence of the process, my reporting mixes findings with analysis.

Physical Qualities of the Learning Experience

> There are occasions when everyone understands that a lesson has played out spectacularly well. During such a rare convergence, the experience of valuable learning is tangible in the classroom just as victory (or defeat) can be felt hovering over a stadium after the big game. When the school bell signals an end to learning and destroys it all, but our eyes shout that we are all still stamping and cheering inside, I've been tempted to throw my text and notes to a student like a winning pitcher might toss a game-used ball to a fan. Before they stream from the classroom, I would acknowledge our collective victory with a curt bow and remind them there is no *I* in *team.*
>
> --Excerpt from the researcher's journal

One unanticipated aspect of this research was data chronicling physical manifestations of the learning process. During discussions of classroom dynamics, nearly all experienced teachers recalled a particular lesson when there occurred a completely unexpected, physically perceptible, intense and almost electrical connection among students and teacher. It was as if learning briefly became a physical entity and was kept hovering over the desks by a kind of synchronous,

collective will. Just as common when describing such sublime, ephemeral, teaching moments is a punch line like "then the principal came over the intercom" or "then an office aid knocked on the door."

Although it was not information intentionally solicited during interviews, teachers talking together commonly referred to instances of such extreme connection without hesitation, apparently feeling no need to establish their actuality to other teachers. They further observed that when such linkage became apparent, students and teacher typically joined to further coax and maintain its presence by use of facial expressions, body posture, and even non-specific sounds suggesting a relationship not dissimilar to a gospel choir engaged in *call and response* with their audience.

Although teachers described the physical characteristics of such instances, none could suggest how such interconnectedness could be maintained indefinitely or even what manipulations might produce such moments on demand. The convergence was never duplicated during the following hour, even when the lesson material was identical and all physical circumstances seemed very similar. (Such failure may address the limitations of detailed lesson plans and elaborately stated learning objectives.) Ultimately, these descriptions provide only an intriguing sidebar to this study of valuable learning. Still, the data is noteworthy and raises many intriguing questions, such as, is the described reciprocal energy measurable in any quantitative way? Is this phenomenon of connective teaching moments evidence of yet unclassified energy similar to auto-kinesis or collective prayer?

My tentative data are insufficient to justify any definitive commentary about the origin or essence of the phenomenon. Field theory as explained by new sciences,

however, might offer a context for exploration. In that regard, I've wondered if the strange attractor during such instances might be our shared stories, triggering non-cognitive convergences of emotion, memory and extraordinary empathy. Whatever explains the intensity of these connections, it can be safely assumed they don't result from strategies published in the average teacher's guide. And whether or not the phenomenon's existence can be established with quantitative methodology acceptable to all scientists, it serves as apt commentary about education. Education is not as controllable as the dominant factory metaphor suggests, rather, the process of learning is as fragile as a floating soap bubble. Intuition suggests that convergence of will and intent among learners and teacher most likely occurs when knowledge is offered in the presence of genuine trust and selfless love. Valuable learning is one way of describing interconnections with a universe larger than ourselves.

Experience of Valuable Learning from the Student's Viewpoint

> I believe...I believe...that's not a very easy thing to talk about! Good thing I'm just writing these for my notebook grade. It's not like you're gonna read these at all so I'm just gonna bs for the rest of this page. But just in case you do ever read this I BELIEVE if Margie Thomas ever touches my boyfriend that I'm gonna drop the engine in her car. And BELIEVE me I could. It only takes ten minutes once you find the three bolts...
>
> - excerpt from Karen's Weekly Writing Topics notebook using the prompt, *I believe...*

In spite of my long years of experience with teenage students, I remain impressed by their collective good humor, intelligence, earnestness, emotional depth, adaptability, and optimism. Karen's entry above is a good illustration of how actual curriculum is determined by student need, not by teacher desire. I had hoped the writing prompt *I believe* would force her into an uncontrollable exploration of her deepest moral core. However, the only reflection Karen *needed* that day (and therefore the only reflection she was then capable of) was how to quash a romantic rival. In a passively aggressive manner, Karen told me the assignment was not relevant to her life and she still liked me although sometimes I was obviously clueless.

The Value of Personal Worth

When listening to my students, sometimes I am disheartened by situations they consider normal or deserved, and by the emotional weight they bear. Many times their sense of worldliness and accomplishment is exaggerated, but often their sense of personal failure and inadequacy is exaggerated as well. Antagonists of caring as a feature of public education have perverted the term *self*, stripped it of its virtue and made it a mocking epithet for what they consider liberal inanity. However, if this nation is to be supplied with functioning, productive, patriotic citizens, then valuable learning begins with issues of personal self and confidence. Ideally, these lessons are taught concurrently by families, churches, and other institutions supportive of the developing child. On the other hand, the school should do nothing that hinders those processes either. Believing in the significance of self is a prerequisite to establishing any sense of community. It is impossible to love others

or work for a common good without understanding that we are each worthy of love as well.

Adrian: In my house I have to take care of my older sister who is mentally handicapped and when she gets into trouble, I get into trouble. I am expected to take care of her when my mom works which is Tuesday to Saturday. I hardly ever have time to do things with my friends after school. None of my older sisters went to college and my mom puts a lot of pressure on me to succeed and go to college but sometimes there is so much pressure that I think I can't handle it.

Crystal: I wish I was hurt proof. What I mean is that I wish no guy would ever be able to break my heart.

Adrian wonders whether her personal value is based upon being her parents' child, her sister's caretaker, or living out a mother's dream when older siblings have failed. As a result of such turmoil, Adrian, like Crystal, lacks confidence that she can ever earn the love she needs. Alone, schools can't solve these internal issues, but knowing student needs suggests that aiding their struggles should at least be a tangential goal. Tonya's quote below illustrates how resilient the young spirit can be and how strong the desire for relationships is. Even though she has been hurt, she must try again.

Tonya: If you let people get close to you then when they leave they hurt you. Ever since I was little, every friend I ever had left. I try to keep a distance from people at school but I have made some really good friends anyway.

Penny: I could have changed the whole game if I would have just gone right down the lane and scored, but instead I passed the ball off because I told myself if I missed I would have screwed the whole thing up. I hate hearing that little voice.

Jeff: I think schools should not give grades. They are just letters. What can they possibly say?

Justin: Well, I would choose to be smarter cause my hole life I have been like not very smart and I try to be smart but my mind will not learn or something like that. I would like to know what it feels like to read or to spell. I have never done those things very well.

Not surprisingly, usually Jeff's grades are not very good. His defensiveness is predictable but asking how much of a whole person is measured by school grades deserves consideration. Justin's gloomy self-evaluation is more troublesome. Should recognizing what failure has done to Justin beyond the academic damage merit automatic A's, happy face stickers, and social promotion? No. Viable self-esteem is not built upon false accomplishment. However, will Justin automatically achieve when challenged by *raising the bar*? No. Rather, Justin's extreme case is an indictment of the narrow, one-size-fits-all curriculum with which we have saddled our children. Penny's mention of the *little doubting voice* in her head is not as devastating, but it reminds us how lack of confidence, based on low self worth, can limit the ability to cope with opportunity.

Being a confidant for so much teenage angst can jade a teacher. Seeing the same issues play out so often (and usually to good effect) can lull us into dismissing

the stories as mere teenage drama. But then I am given entries like Jazmin's and I wonder what kind of world we've made and what else has been done to this child and where are all my smug answers.

Jazmin: All the boys left besides that one. That one was like pull your pants down and I was like no then he was I am going to kill you if you don't so I did so then he got on top of me and I was crying and scared so I push him and he go...(response to the prompt, *Recall an uncomfortable moment in your life*)

The Value of Purpose

Shirley: She always tells me that I can't do this or I can't do that for some reason. That's why I am trying hard to get out of this school with great grades and then go to a great college and shove it in her face. I know this all sounds really bad but it's all true. I am trying not to be like her so when I grow up I don't have to say that I didn't try or get what I wanted. I don't want to turn out like her and put down my kid's dreams just because I couldn't do it. My mom has just helped me realize that no matter how many times she tells me 'no' or that I can't do it, I can do it. I love making her feel proud of me and proving her wrong.

Consistently, my students speak of wanting lives that are productive and make contributions to others. Closely linked to the need to establish self-worth is their search of life roles that are useful and meaningful. Sometimes, as in Shirley's case, they see other's lack of faith as obstacles to finding purpose in life.

Teresa: When my parents got a divorce and I started living with my mom and younger sister, I became a problem child. I used to be kicked out of school for fighting and everything. Even with all the trouble I caused, my mom still had patience for me. Of course, like any parent should, she would get mad, but she knew I was going through some changes and sooner or later things would be different. She would send us home to our father's house during the summer, things didn't go too well there. After I found out my dad had a family of his own and stopped taking care of me and my sister, I grew closer to my mom. I needed someone to love and my dad was no longer there. Even though I caused so much trouble my mom was still there to love me.

Tom: Parents teach children all kinds of stuff and not just with words. They teach by example. Also younger children look up to older children and brothers and sisters. They want to be like us, and instead of getting annoyed, we should be flattered and set good examples. School doesn't teach us about God and how Jesus died for your sins. Instead they banish prayer and stuff. There are many things that we must learn outside of school.

Often disruption of established family patterns makes a student desperate to re-establish old roles (like Teresa hoping to be a bigger part of her father's new family.) Without that sense of purpose, she became a *problem child.* Many, including Tom, expect the family to provide purpose and teach roles by example rather than words. Tom also points out that no school can meet all needs for learning, that valuable learning also takes place outside of school.

Sonja: When I was in elementary school I was different from everyone else. I was the only Hispanic girl in my class and I was the poorest girl in my class that was in a private school. One day I felt so bad that I cried and I went home and was comforted by my dad. School doesn't teach how to deal with real life situations. School tries to be a safe place where we can ask others for help and someone will help you. But we can't learn how to think and how to act and how to do things if the teacher does it for us and punishes us when we don't conform.

Sensitive accommodation of cultural diversity is part of Sonja's story. Individual purpose is clouded when cultures and economic realities clash. Sonja didn't need to be told she was Hispanic or poor. She needed assurance that she still had purpose and worth in this new setting. Could her esteemed place in the family be duplicated in the extended community? Although she seems to praise school as a sort of sanctuary for diversity, she damns it for denying her the skills that will enable her to fashion a new and viable sense of purpose. Her plea is that lessons be connected to life in meaningful practice.

Joe: Everyone has a side to them that they try to hide. Not everyone is an evil person, and everyone always deserves a chance to show that they can be a great person and that they are something. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you are no one because to someone you're everything and more.

Joe has a good heart. He hurts when others hurt. He does everything he can to find the good in people that others miss. He is a champion of the common person.

Joe knows that everyone has purpose. Joe knows that somewhere, for everyone, love is waiting.

The Value of Family Relationships

Popular portraits of teenagers suggest that friends receive more attention than family. My experience suggests that relationships outside the family are tremendously important but usually viewed as static and somewhat simplistically: either those people are *there for you* with unquestioning support and acceptance or they suddenly reveal themselves as two-faced back-stabbers. Family, on the other hand, is a constant source of both stability and turmoil. Even when feeling betrayed, my students wrestle with family ties more than any other relationship.

Over the last decade, a seemingly endless list of social issues has been forced into the curriculum; including drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse, sex education, racial integration, public health, driver education, patriotism and, most recently, attempts to introduce the Ten Commandments and required (no, it just looks like school prayer) *moments of silence.* Without commenting on the appropriateness or the ability to meaningfully address such topics, it is incredible that family issues remain off limits in the public schools. About 15 years ago, my school offered an elective course teaching household maintenance skills like cooking, sewing, budgeting and child care. Family Life was a popular elective course for boys as well as girls. Although not duplicated by our district's vocational school program, it was removed to provide space for more required math and science. Family is the one topic that my students are unanimously concerned with but it is not addressed in any direct manner. The

families they describe are not always television perfect, but strategies for understanding and maintaining those ties are considered most valuable.

Ashley: My niece is living with me. She is my brother's baby. She is three years old. My brother is 22. This experience is hard on everyone. It is hard on my parents having to raise their granddaughter because my brother cannot. I think it is also hard on my brother knowing he cannot take care of his own child. It makes me angry sometimes that he cannot or will not pay for anything for her. Then I also see that he is trying to take care of her the best way he knows how and that is by giving her to my parents.

Amber: I've learned you don't know how precious things are until you lose them. Like your virginity. Everyone thinks of it as nothing these days but that is something. I would give almost anything to go back. Then there are boyfriends who move or leave or just don't care about you that you have to deal with. And I know firsthand how it feels to care the world for someone and they never felt the same and you find out and you just can't stop caring and it's the worst when your own blood, your own father who does it to you and leaves and never cares about you.

Zak: There was a regional contest that I went to for vo-tech. The category was automotive service technology and I got to go to Nationals. I was so scared and nervous until my dad said to me, "Even if you place last I will be proud of you." Right that minute I felt a huge burden lifted off my shoulders. I was still a little nervous but not scared. I ended up placing eighth out of fifty and I was somewhat worried about disappointing my father. My

father is the one who taught me most of what I know about cars. I thought that by me failing that meant that he failed as well. He didn't really care though. He just wanted me to have fun.

Chanel: Every day I wish my parents were alive but I know that is not possible and I have to face the fact that they are gone and people don't understand the way that I feel and that is why it is so difficult for me to talk about what brings me joy.

Karen: Of all the people who have helped me in my life, my father has the most. I have never met my mother, but my father has been married several times. My real mother left my father when I was only three months and he's been divorced twice. What I am getting at is we've both had hard lives and that's why I say we help each other...Sometimes I just need a father instead of a counselor.

Carla: I know some kids are embarrassed to be seen in public with their parents but I am not. I love my mom and she has been such a positive role model for me. I think a parent should be a parent first and a friend second. I am so glad that I was lucky enough to be adopted by my parents and I love them so much.

Michael: My mother has been my best teacher who has always been there for me no matter what the situation was. Whenever I was bad she was there to discipline me when needed. When I was good she was there to appreciate me. There were so many times looking back when I was so afraid, and she'd come to me and say I could face anything. No one else could be

what she has been to me. That is why I give my mother the respect she deserves.

Justin: My mom and her boyfriend have helped me a lot. My mom more because I have known her longer, but her boyfriend has helped me a lot. They don't really just give me things, they teach me lessons when they do things for me. I'm just thankful that my mom found someone that I actually like and he likes me.

Teresa: I have always wanted to have a great relationship with my mom like my other friends. But being with my mom always makes me feel worthless. When I was little my mom used to hit us and hit us badly. I am now totally afraid of her and she calls me stupid and why I can't do anything right and I get this if anything goes wrong. My mom doesn't understand why I am not close to her but I keep it to myself at home because my Daddy won't listen to it.

From informal observation, homes with both biological parents present are becoming rarer but I don't see the intensity or importance of family ties diminishing in my students' lives. As a divorced father myself, the stories that cut deepest feature parents who discard their children along with the previous marriage. As an adult, I know the circumstances surrounding many of their stories are more complicated and extenuating than they can understand, but their hurt is real and their anger damaging. So basic is their link with family - whatever combination of significant persons - that it appears to affect all elements of valuable learning, perhaps it is the strongest determiner in a life. To the degree that family relations can color perceptions of

community, they may be predictive of the trust level in relationships beyond the family. Still, there are children who transcend their circumstances and defy the cruelest odds. Katrina is a wonderfully gracious child; bright, lovely and college bound.

> Katrina: If I could rewind my life up until now I would probably start off by changing my parents. My dad really was never there for me, he's been in prison most of his life. The only time I was really around him was in the sixth grade to the first day of eighth grade, because on that first day of eighth grade he went back to prison...it was fun while it lasted. My mom and I never really got along since I was little. I don't know whether I should call her a bad mom or what? My mom has been on crack since I was in the six grade and at the end of the six grade I moved out and into my grandmother's house. My mom lives on the street with the crack crowd and every now and then she comes to my grandmother's house and says she's going to straighten up her life and about two weeks later she's back on the street.

The Value of Community Relationships

> Chris: It seems like I'm always angry. I tend to control things and over-analyze things more than I should. It's when I try to control events and the people around me that I get angry.

As student experience extends beyond family and into the community, Chris' plight becomes more common. Students often question how they can maintain their individuality while accommodating the differences in others. Importantly, Chris seems to realize that at least some of his anger results from the illusion that he can

assert his will over others. Similarly, Ashley (below) expresses fear that in her effort to meet society's expectations, she may be trapped in an unsuitable life.

Ashley: Although I know it hurt him, I finally came clean and told him everything. I almost feel like I lost something that could have been special had I given it the chance and now I might never have that chance again. But at the same time, I'm afraid of pretending so long that I could end up married and with children before I realized I'm not really happy.

Matt: Someone I had never seen was sitting next to my grandpa. He came over and said he liked the way I played ball. He said he saw me at our first game but didn't have a chance to talk to me. But he drove over an hour and a half to watch me play. I will never forget that and that is the greatest compliment ever.

Matt's story suggests that although family is extremely influential concerning how confidently we interact with the larger community, often kindness and encouragement by strangers carries exaggerated importance simply because it is unexpected.

Gina: Secretly I wish we wore uniforms at school. If you look at the kids in school today it is so segregated it's pitiful. Kids are judged by their parent's money and the clothes they wear. Uniforms would cut most of this out. Just walking down the halls you can see where the kid's family stands on the social ladder. The money for this program could come out of all the extra taxes we pay that get wasted on stuff that really doesn't matter.

Concerning Gina's support for school uniforms, I believe it is not a vote for conformity but a plea to remove the superficial differences that obscure our deeper similarities as human beings. Many of my students, like Gina and those quoted below, make eloquent arguments for the value of lessons about tolerance and interconnectedness.

Kelly: The most important thing you need to know is how to get along with people. The best way to learn is to learn by experience, that way you don't forget the lesson. Most people have to learn this way because deep down they don't believe or trust other people.

Terrance: I believe every situation and every person has something you can love and hate. You determine which side you'll see. I see so many great things in other people that I want for myself. However, at the same time there are things in every person I find fake, stupid, and childish. The fact is that everyone has both sides and if you wish to be in the grace of their beauty, don't expect not to get burned by their flaws. My problem is I don't have enough tolerance for flaws to experience the beauty I know is there.

Barbara: I don't see why most people think that they are better than others when everyone is the same. We just go about doing things differently but everyone has the same emotions and feelings. Everyone has a heart, so everyone can be hurt.

Maggie: If people would look at life through the eyes of love, they wouldn't want to harm anyone or anything. Racism would also decrease because love doesn't see color.

Andrew: I think that the most important thing I've learned is that you cannot change the ways of others. All that you can do is change yourself. If you allow people to hurt you they will. You have to filter out the hatefulness of others and you do that by changing the way you react to them.

The Value of Emotion

Margie: My parents divorced when I was only two. My mom's been married twice since then and my dad once. In that I learned that love doesn't always last. Then I learned what appears to be love from the outside isn't always love on the inside.

My students have taught me that they will accommodate an endless range of emotions and the accompanying realities when the expressed emotion is perceived as honest and true. They tell me that if I am disappointed in their actions that I don't always need to hide my anger. Conversely, I shouldn't tell my students that I love them when my actions say otherwise.

Julie: There are a lot of things you can learn in school from reading, writing, math and English. School can teach you a lot of things but it can't really help you deal with what happens at your home or in the streets. Sure they can tell you not to drink or do drugs, but they aren't there when you get asked to do it. What you learn in school are mental things that you carry with you, but emotional and scary things they can't help with.

Pat: Kids learn to love and hate from their parents, not from the schools. If the parents show only positive things and teach their children there probably wouldn't be as much trouble. The school can only do so much.

Some parents do not realize the profound influence they have on their children.

It is difficult for any teacher to always stand apart from the inherently mechanical qualities of school's physical organization. Too often, I discover that I've been overwhelmed again and squandered my limited energies on paperwork rather than invest myself in people. But my students know what is important and are quick to remind me. Whenever I get to feeling that I am the only one who can save the world, students like Julie and Pat help keep my ego in check.

Pam: I have had like four teachers I didn't like. The teachers I am talking about always made me and my classmates feel like we were an inconvenience if we needed to ask them questions. They would always seem to get agitated if we raised our hands or started walking to their desk.

Charlie: My best teacher has been Coach. Not because he is a good book teacher but because he has always been nice and fair to me. Also as a coach you see a different side to him than you do when you only know him as a teacher.

Kaylee: Many people didn't like my teacher because she was always taking time to talk to the students about important things that students go through. I guess they thought she was being nosy but now I know that the love she had for us and teaching was what motivated her into talking to us and helping us become better students so that we could have a better future. I will always remember her.

Teacher education courses (rightfully) stress the distance that must be maintained between teacher and students for professional, legal, moral reasons and even for issues of effectiveness. But the truth is, most students learn more from teachers they like. *Like*, of course, is a multifaceted term. *Like* does not mean *buddy*. In fact, I have witnessed student ridicule of teachers who try to be one of the students, thereby rendering themselves worthless as educators. Additionally, I've witnessed nothing to suggest that perceptions of a teacher's academic standards as being *hard* or *easy* determine their affection. Emotion is the connector. A feature of every academically productive classroom is the presence of shared trust. We trust those who nurture with loving respect. As educators, the distance we must maintain from our students is not an emotional distance.

The Value of Personal Transcendence

The final category of valuable learning as suggested by my students' stories I call *transcendence*, for lack of another term. In addition to their insistence that emotion and relationship accompany valuable lessons, there is another aspect of their yearning that goes beyond the here and now. The most hopeful quality of my students' voices is the presence of *wonder*. Don't believe that all teenagers are damaged. They still dream of better worlds. Someday, facts may serve as tools to construct that alternate reality, but I also owe them a caring space to nurture those dreams.

> Peggy: Part of me wants to be able to blend in and hide from the world and to just watch everything going on around me. But then there is still

another part of me who wants to shine above the crowd and make sure everyone knows who I am.

Caroline: People don't understand what I like. I like to sometimes just sit and look at the sky and the stars. I like to sit and think about life and why I exist and what my future holds for me and wonder if I can handle what life has in store for me. I don't like shopping all the time or putting on makeup or worrying about my hair. I don't like showing my feelings either. I have been told I don't act like a girl.

Jackie: I like to escape reality in stories and art. In my art I control the world. I don't have anyone telling me what to do, making me feel bad or yelling at me and asking why I can't do better. When I draw all I focus on is drawing. Sometimes I am so into it that I don't hear when people start yelling at me. What I enjoy the most is the peace I feel when I draw and I make the world into the way I want. The things that hurt me, I leave out.

Stacy: I don't deal with grief in a healthy way and I know that. That's part of the reason I'm always writing something. I think so long as I keep writing, so long as my pen keeps moving that I'll stay sane. For the emotions that come have a strange way of comforting me. And of all the things I do, that's the best one for me.

Gene: How can someone just not want to discover or understand something that's new to them? Better things will never come to those who stick to their traditional values and shun anything different from what they've believed before. If you have truly opened your mind to an idea and

experienced it and then you don't like it, that's fine. The point is that you know what you're disagreeing with before you toss it out. Think what you might be missing.

Sometimes in the middle of a lecture when I've really looked out across my classroom, I've been struck by just how wearily disengaged so many of my students appear to be. There are days when I would be willing to bet that some of them, if required, would be unable pick to me out of a police lineup. After all, just how distinctive is any overweight, balding, middle-aged, English-teaching, white guy from countless other high school teachers? Students would have us believe that school is inconsequential beyond being a place to meet friends. However, if their stories are listened to, it is obvious that school does matter. Their portraits of the system and its adults are not always flattering, but they are informative concerning what issues are valuable enough to earn their attention.

Separate from this research, my student journal assignments were originally developed for a *practical* reason: to generate more original material for their formal, public writings. The topic choices were introduced to spare me from reading only about someone's boyfriend or the joys of football all year long. The *public* and *private* labels were a desperate attempt to cut my marking time in half because as I quickly learned, a check mark, a smiley face or quick comments like "Great!" or "Me, too!" isn't enough. This is not an endeavor that will reduce grading time. Written comments must be specific and lengthy enough to assure the student that you have seriously considered

the ideas. The teacher's comments cannot be condescending or dismissive. Students need to know that you are listening.

Whatever I originally planned, it was soon evident that the importance of the journals was greater than I ever expected. It has allowed me some degree of personal contact with each of my 140 students. It has helped me remember them as more than statistics, another paper to grade, or names on a seating chart. It has given me a way to appreciate even those who are not particularly strong English students or disruptive in my class. For my students, the entries have allowed them to pontificate about questions that no one has bothered to ask them before.

Private entries have given them an audience that is trustworthy, that tries to help rather than always judge. *Public* entries have provided a vehicle for students to share experiences and insight with others while creating a stronger sense of community and receiving some assurance that they are not alone. Sometimes, in their efforts to appear in control and worldly as they write advice to classmates, they *name* their own issues as well, reassuring themselves as they seek to help others. Because they sign their comments, many students have been grateful for this *forced* communication with their classmates. Like many of us, they would otherwise shy from the awkward process of becoming acquainted.

Of course, the above entries are dramatic examples but they aren't aberrations. Rather these entries are indicative of how intensely students feel, their honesty, and the range of individual responses. The world they describe

is not always pleasant and certainly bears little resemblance to childhood as envisioned by public education's critics and reformers. Some people still act as if our nation's social clock can be reset to Dayton, Ohio, 1903, simply by willing it. Society very well may be *worse* than it once was, but this is the world where we must find meaning today. I am not pretending to understand exactly how valuable lessons of self, purpose, family, community, emotion and transcendence can be taught and mastered. Nor is this list meant to imply that development of the whole child is a linear process. However, I do believe that incorporating what is most important to young learners not only enhances the student's well-being, it increases the likelihood of attaining the narrower goal of academic achievement.

Experience of Valuable Learning from the Teacher's Viewpoint

Whenever teachers are together, they never completely stop talking about the process of learning or trading classroom experiences. For this research, I supplemented recall of such informal discussions with recorded interviews with educators who had been given a general topic outline beforehand.

The Value of Ethical Caring

Asked hypothetically to choose between sacrificing some of their course's subject matter for the sake of deeper, contextual understanding by their students, unsurprisingly, teachers chose deeper understanding. Asked to choose between sacrificing their course's subject matter or a student's emotional well-being,

invariably teachers chose the student's emotions over intellect. In the opinion of a foreign language teacher:

> My subject matter isn't going to change his existence, but how he sees himself as a person and whether he believes he can succeed will matter for the rest of his life. And my job as a teacher is to use my subject matter as a vehicle to empower him, make him want to succeed, make him want to have goals beyond getting out of here.

Despite uniform enthusiasm for their subject matter, more experienced teachers often viewed the factual core of their specialized knowledge as collateral to the challenge of teaching. One science teacher concluded an entertaining conversational detour about black holes by saying, "I love this stuff and I can make some of them love it, too. But in the end, if I can help a kid decide what he wants to do with his life, that may be more important than anything else I do here." People who emphasized the importance of uniform standards, accountability, and curriculum alignment, tended to be either non-tenured teachers or educators whose jobs removed them from daily exposure to students in traditional classroom settings, such as media center persons, computer teachers, counselors, administrators.

This is not to say that these persons never expressed concern for the whole child. In the middle of her criticisms about how the lack of curriculum uniformity sabotages academic excellence, one non-classroom educator explained how each year she made a point of establishing regular, personal contact with students in the hall whom she perceived as displaced and lonely. Interestingly, her initial attraction to them was their innate (and often unacknowledged) intelligence. She said:

> I spotted him right off. It was the twinkle in his eyes and I knew he was thinking. He says 'hello' to me and he may not do that with anyone else. I do deliberately try to pick kids who are lonely and talk to them because I don't want people to be alone here. High school is a lonely business. I wouldn't say that I enjoyed it. I was very glad to get on down the road.

I know this speaker as an intelligent and able professional, so I feel justified suggesting the possibility that her educational views are driven as much by her great empathy for these chosen children as by an abstract regard for intellect and academic excellence. In fact, the natural inclination to regard student lives as difficult and meaningful struggles was a common theme throughout conversations with teachers. Teachers able to see themselves reflected in their students, and acting in ways to help them through difficult times, illustrate Nel Noddings' (1984) *one-caring,* as contrasted to the more emotionally detached concept she calls *ethical caring* (driven by what is necessary to be moral). Noddings explains:

> Apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take on the other's reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other...The commitment to act in behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his reality throughout the appropriate time span, and the continual renewal of commitment over this span of time are the essential elements of caring from the inner view. (p. 16)

Consistently, communicating such a sense of emotional involvement and active caring was a feature of every teacher's attempt to define learning that was valuable for students and themselves. This desire to establish and maintain an atmosphere of genuine caring and trust often manifested itself in actions beyond simple respect and civility. One teacher confided:

> I can think of an incident when I had a confrontation with a student and it was not a positive one. He said things that really irritated me and I said some things that really irritated him. After I thought about it and I could see the hurt, I went back to that student and apologized to him and then apologized to the class. I did this because I realized the impact that could have long term. I remembered my own hurt as a student. I don't know if that retrieved the full effect of that, but I had to do something.

This emphasis upon active caring as a primary feature of valuable learning may be more evolutionary in some teachers than others. "My first year I just wanted to get through the class, the content. After that, specific content was less important than the learning process and my relationship with students," remembered a four-year teaching veteran. I remember myself as a young teacher ranting as my job description was expanded to include drug and sex education, insistence that I become attuned to students' emotional needs and more involved in the community. I protested that I was only certified to teach English and that any judgment about my effectiveness should be based upon that criterion alone. I don't think I was as hard-hearted as overwhelmed by the impossibility of caring for the whole child, 140 times and in 140 ways a day. Like other teachers, especially beginning teachers, I was still

trying to master the informational core of my courses. Critics charge that caring strategies are implemented at the expense of rigorous intellectual standards. Nel Noddings (1984) insists that mastery of informational content is a prerequisite for any teaching driven by caring theory. If for no other reason, the teacher must first master subject matter to free energies and concentration needed to address other issues of learning. My findings suggest that it shouldn't be a matter of choosing either *care* or *facts* alone. Caring for the whole child has the additional dividend of increasing likelihood for more extensive transfer of the informational curriculum. A child who is afraid, lonely, lost, or hungry rarely is the best candidate for winning the state spelling bee. Sometimes feeding a hungry child is the best, first step to academic excellence. As one counselor expressed it, "There will be kids who expect others to do things for them and they aren't really appreciative or grateful. Then you have these other kids who are just starved for authentic attention in regard to them as people. I have seen one caring person make a difference."

The Value of Process

Even those most publicly identified with maintenance of the institution - administrators - displayed ambivalence toward the popular metaphor of school as an educational factory. Said one assistant principal, "In a factory if something doesn't work, it is thrown out. In a school we have to keep trying to fix it. You can't throw people out." Because an institution is not a soulless thing but a network of individual lives whose collective fates are intertwined, I am hopeful that caring *people* rather than *regulations* will maintain a humane balance while needed reform is developed.

Others I talked with couldn't share such optimism. Some teachers questioned the most basic tasks expected by the educational bureaucracy:

> I read an article once that was so interesting to me. Its assertion was that anytime we assign a grade to something, we are buying into a materialistic-driven view of life because that grade is nothing but money in a different version. We are not looking at who we are, why we are that person...whether we are personable, whether we care. All the human things have been set aside and we are being driven by *how much does it pay.*

Significantly, that teacher used *we* rather than *the student* when talking about judgments inherent in a grade. What, she asks, do teachers reveal about their values through the simple, unquestioned act of assigning grades? Such serious reflection about the status quo suggests disregard for hierarchical privilege; teachers and students are elevated together as learners on similar quests for meaning.

This teacher was not alone in her fears that many times our educational system is not functioning in ways that encourage valuable learning:

> We're so concerned with students doing wrong things that we won't let them make mistakes. Even outside the classroom, like student government, we encourage them to just fill in the blanks. Rather, we should say, 'This is how we did it last year, how would you like to do it?' As I teacher I need to set parameters, but the path should be their choice.

By eliminating discovery, experimentation, and permission to make mistakes in an emotionally safe environment, students have fewer opportunities for translating ideas into empowering action. Lessons untested within the learner's world remain

undervalued, fragile abstractions. Additionally, standardizing boundaries of inquiry and descriptions of acceptable ways of knowing may limit perceptions of education's lifelong worth. One teacher expressed his concern this way:

> Unintentionally we are teaching our kids that the only value of knowledge is 'what it will get for me.' That's what I am afraid of. The value of knowledge is not for an ACT score to get you into college. The knowledge that's important is the kind that will keep you in college, the kind that will make you happy.

The Value of Commitment

Not only did teachers express dismay about the limited qualities of learning supported by the current system, at least one older teacher questioned the quality and commitment of some newer teachers entering the profession:

> I think the caliber of people coming into our profession has decreased. I think other opportunities have opened up for women and 20 years ago that wasn't the case. So we lose many talented people to business because of more lucrative opportunities. But I also think that some people don't let money run their lives. They are missionaries rather than mercenaries. We have a fair share of those. They have depth of character and know what is important.

The tepid hopefulness contained in such statements reflects belief that student success is still possible. Teachers' faith that good can still be accomplished within the system is not a testament to the bureaucracy's design or to the outsiders who direct and reform it. Politically motivated edicts, which ignore the societal and economic realities reflected in our classrooms or take the form of unfunded mandates, have

become increasingly intrusive, negative, and confounding. Considering the number of salaried persons and agencies whose stated mission is to provide support for the nation's public schools, it is astonishing how many educators feel compelled to choose which competing master they will serve. One teacher expressed her choice as: "I'm free to break molds and I deliberately do so. We have control over who we are and we can refuse to destroy the child by bowing to the system."

A public litany of mistrust against teachers and belittlement of students' seriousness and potential has taken its toll during the last 30 years. It is not unusual for teachers to view most educational governing bodies and most self-identified reform coalitions as hindrances to helping students. Very often, hopefulness hinges upon their own fragile tenacity or dependence upon in the collective quality, commitment, and character of fellow teachers.

Final Analysis: What Are the Qualities of Valuable Learning?

As a classroom teacher I have been a longtime opponent of most outside accountability efforts and standardized testing movements. In the past, my major objection to such tests was the trivial nature of their informational base and how removed they were from my students' school or community experiences. Before I began this heuristic study, I suspected that any exploration of *valuable learning* would result in a prescriptive list of *valuable facts* and skills – identification of the knowledge people utilize during a lifetime, as opposed to the transitory truths featured on the average multiple choice test.

What I have come to understand is that although both student and teacher descriptions of learning include facts, the facts themselves are not the valuable

learning; they are enablers for valued learning. The essence of valuable learning is any knowledge that celebrates the wondrous complexity of interconnections among the earth and its creatures, while encouraging lives made meaningful by the quality of the relationships they nurture.

Facts are not foreign to the experience of valuable learning: facts are an integral feature of the process. It is often subject matter mastery and a teacher's enthusiasm for that subject which draws students into the educational conversation. The teacher's mastery of facts is possible and persuasive because he or she can convey how these facts help connect one's life to the whole of human experience. The goal of valuable learning is not transformation of every student into the teacher, but demonstration of how this material in other contexts might lead to unique but equally meaningful journeys. The teacher's chosen approach to understanding and meaning, aided by these informational tools, is not *the* answer but a model encouraging autonomy.

The hurried pace and bureaucratic untidiness of public education is more than an annoyance. The traditional classroom's shame is that it encourages us to forget the honor of teaching too easily. And it is an honor to stand among our children, to work beside them. In exchange for honest caring, teachers are witnesses to the endless unfolding of human potential. The process makes our body old, but our spirit forever young. Sometimes, society loses its way but things are always righted. Eventually machines are replaced by loving people, because only human beings, informed by heart as well as intellect, are efficient enough to teach the lessons that are most valuable. As one science teacher reminisced about an influential teacher, "I can't

remember the books, but I remember the teacher very well. She imparted more than knowledge. Her focus was genuine concern for me."

Chapter 5

What is the experience of valuable learning from a learner's perspective?

This chapter presents final conclusions concerning the exploration of this research question. As a way of introduction, I will reflect upon my experience using heuristic methodology and its usefulness for perspective-seeking understanding. The findings of this research then will be compared to commentary from the related literature. I will discuss the research's implications for myself and other teacher-learners. Further, I will describe an attempted accommodation of the personal issues that initiated this journey as expressed by the metaphor of shadow. Finally, recommendations will be offered for teacher training and school reform as suggested by the study's findings.

Understanding Through Heuristic Methodology

This study is one result of a nearly 25 year teaching career in the public schools and participation in a university graduate program. My wife, Sue, (also a career teacher) and I entered our doctoral programs tentatively, completing hours with the immediate goal of inflating pay steps as we neared retirement. What we didn't anticipate was that the program would have worth beyond money.

I am respectfully incredulous of public school educators who teach for 30 and more years, proclaiming undiminished excitement for the daily experience of the classroom. No other government sector job applies complicated formulas combining age and service in ways that routinely postpone retirement for 25 or more years. More than 20 productive years at the same task is not expected from soldiers, postal workers, elected officials or other civil servants. Perhaps holding teachers to more rigorous service standards reflects the perception that our work is not as stressful or

perhaps it is the public's collective revenge for all those long, glorious summer vacations we enjoy. Sue and I were excellent teachers before we entered our doctoral programs and we are excellent teachers now. We fit the psychological profile of many other *Baby Boomers* who chose teaching as a career and are now nearing retirement age. We are products of 1950's middle-class families. We were raised believing in the virtue of service and the necessity for collective social and political action. Although we enjoy our personal comforts, we have never linked salary to job satisfaction. Additionally, Sue and I are both first-born children who seem to carry an exaggerated sense of responsibility and all the other psychological baggage birth order often implies. So when we entered this doctoral program we were not public school burn-outs, but it would be fair to call us *numb*.

The vocabulary of graduate school was difficult at first, but growing familiarity with the terminology framed concepts that were novel yet instantly familiar, echoing struggles that we had been unable to even verbalize before. Being *students* in school became a valued refuge from our work as *teachers* in school. The long drive to and from the university sometimes resembled a portable classroom (I was usually two chapters behind) where we discussed the day's readings and what it meant to us. There were days when I learned as much during the drives as I did in class. I learned things in books and I learned about our relationship and often it was hard to judge which lessons were more valuable.

A generous group of professors and classmates (many of whom became friends as well) were respectful of our contributions and supportive of our quests. Throughout our studies, we always were encouraged to find meaning in the context of

our experiences. Occasionally, knowledge became a greater obstacle than a tool, but most often my teachers encouraged the pursuit of truths most valuable to me.

There were many ideas that competed for my attention during this process, but the theories of Michael Polanyi (1969) probably are most responsible for realization of this study. His theoretical base in conjunction with Clarke Moustakas' (1990) design model for heuristic research gave me a way to pursue meaning that I couldn't approach otherwise. It offered me other ways of knowing. Heuristic methodology enabled me to understand that even the seemingly haphazard collection of literature selections I taught year after year in my high school English class had order and purpose. The organization of my course's material was based on more than conscious design. The questions that connected my literature were issues I needed to understand as much as teach. Even the student journal topics, which I had collected and used for years, centered on questions whose answers could be as valuable to me as to my students. Experience in public education had already convinced me that curriculums deemed best for the *gifted* are also best for the *average*. Apparently, tacit knowledge was informing me that lessons I deemed important for my students were also important for me.

Study Findings and Related Literature

I found no previous, published research that dealt with valuable learning from a learner's point of view. Much has been written about learning from an instructor's perspective, but it was of little use since I now credited the idea we are both teacher and learner concurrently. Although not always research in the most formal sense, I discovered a wealth of past and current writing by philosophers and practicing

educators whose interests were compatible with my proposed research. The writers most personally influential are critiqued more fully in Chapter 2. Their ideas served me best during what Moustakas (1990) calls heuristic methodology's *initial engagement* (isolating the researcher's passionate concern) and *immersion* (becoming alert to all expressions of the passionate concern.) Examining the results of this research, my findings and conclusions are consistent with many of their observations as well. Although I approached the question of valued learning from the perspective of my particular life experiences, our findings form comparable threads of understanding about valuable learning.

My findings about learner needs were similar to John Dewey (1990) in that both suggest valuable learning involves the natural concerns of the learner and that those concerns are best addressed in ways that encourage autonomy. When students ask the relevance of what we teach, they echo Dewey's belief that the purpose of factual knowledge is to establish webs of connection. What learners told me also reflected Alfred North Whitehead's (1967) assertion that valuable learning isn't as likely in a teacher-centered environment; that we all can learn from each other. My students' dreams for love and better worlds convinced me that, like Whitehead, they refuse to separate spirit from intellect. My learners agreed with Paulo Freire (1999) when they told me that relationships are preferable to power. They want to be free enough to define and follow their own envisioned futures, as Maxine Greene (1988) insists. Finally, my students were clearly desirous to be part of Nel Noddings' (1984) empowering community of constant caring. For learners, these are all characteristics of valuable learning.

Conclusions

Implications for Myself as a Teacher-Learner

I learned much during this heuristic study that didn't find a place in this paper. So many ideas gleaned from others deserve expression in my life. This research has encouraged a conscious desire to make my actions purposeful. For me, today, it begins here: I will trust what I *believe* more than what I *know*. I believe we have an inborn capacity for goodness and caring. I believe that each life has worth, but the meaning of our individual existence is found in the quality of our relationships. I believe that each life is a journey without a realized destination.

This disseratation provided me with my first opportunity to apply Polayni's (1969) principles as I tried to free tacit understanding with intuition. It involves processes I believe are present in any attempt to gain understanding, but it proved more intensely rewarding than other approaches. Although Moustakas' (1990) heuristic model requires genuine effort for engagement, its practice feels less artificial than other methodologies because it urges integration rather than dealing with experience piecemeal. Often, what initially seemed irrelevant, proved to be unifying insight later. A case in point is my experience with the writings of Nel Noddings (1984) concerning the ethic of caring. Although I was drawn immediately to the emotional rightness of her beliefs, there remained part of me that equated a soft heart with a soft head. How could anyone realistically love a world so filled with ugliness? The methodology's holistic emphasis lead me to an accommodation of the perceived paradox.

The heuristic process encouraged an understanding that I don't think I could have achieved any other way. Finally, I saw that cruelty, not caring, is the aberration. The outlier of human potential is the hater, the killer of our best collective dreams. Without that perspective, the horrid anomalies of human baseness can terrify us, disillusion us, drive us further inward, separating us from ourselves and from each other. Perhaps brutality can be the pattern of a single life, or even a whole culture for a sad moment in history, but it is not the greater pattern. Every crime by a molesting priest, child-killing mother, or martyr who seeks to glorify God by inflicting pain is counteracted by countless, unrecorded instances of caring, a myriad great and small loving acts. I am not convinced that we are innately good, but I do believe that the habit of love is as strong as the habit of hate. Lessons of caring are the ones we must teach with our lives.

Through the process of heuristic methodology as experienced during this research, I have become more adept at recognizing and understanding the extremes of my experiences. It encourages integration of the intellect with the spirit. The non-linear tenets of the heuristic process have given me a way of knowing that is more balanced and passionate and meaningful.

Understanding the Shadow

When I teach literature to high school students, I always enjoy presenting stories, like Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" (1912), that use shadow imagery as a metaphor for the darker, hidden proclivities of *self*. Although I now know that such portrayals are only accurate if *self* is considered from an outmoded Cartesian perspective of mind and body as defined and divisible, such stories remain

useful when exploring disconnection in our lives. And so, I used shadow imagery from a T.S. Eliot (1998) poem to frame this paper's introduction in Chapter 1.

I took some care entitling this study. Finally, I settled upon, *Courting the Shadow: A Heuristic Study of Valuable Learning.* Prior variations revolved around the choice of verbals: *persuing, confronting, illuminating, catching, taming, courting.* A manuscript's worth isn't determined by its title, but I wanted to focus my purpose of inquiry. If there was to be personal worth in this short journey, then it had to accomplish more than describing the shadow, for I have long been aware of its presence. *Confronting* suggests that mere recognition diminishes the shadow's power. Although the conscious act of naming an obstacle is an empowering act, another beginning, the obstacle is not neutralized by that action alone. I have no hope of *capturing* or *taming* the shadow because it isn't an entity separable from me. Instead, the shadow is residue from a myriad endlessly shifting relationships between myself and others. Although not the perfect word, *courting* at least suggests a serious dance; recognition of mutual control and reciprocating power.

If I once sought elimination of the shadow, I now doubt that possibility or even the wisdom of such attempts. Like the good tissue destroyed when a tumor is excised, there is cost attached to the obliteration of *problems.* (Is growth possible without the catalyst of struggle?) Perhaps the best strategy is integration of light and dark as Jung (1983) suggests. Today, I would be grateful for even the accommodation struck by my two-year-old son when he was first aware of a shadow following him across the sunny lawn. Initially, his mimicking twin was a source of high amusement but as Michael tried to shake the shadow loose from his shoes, the joy turned to panic.

After endless frantic attempts to break free, terror gave way to calm, causing him to observe, "He is me!"

The shadow, as essential and inseparable from myself, will remain; hindering me, provoking me, reassuring me as the moment dictates. If I learned anything from the heuristic process, it is that there is no end to a journey of inquiry. It is a mistake to believe that all can be understood. Even after 25 years, I can be great and I can be wretched, but I am still vigilant, I still care, and so I still teach. When I can't see my students for their uniqueness or how their welfare determines mine; when they become alien and less than stones, it will be time to quit.

Recommendations for Teacher Training and School Reform

To anyone interested in educational issues, I would recommend reading Alfred North Whitehead's *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (1967) and Nel Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethic and Moral Education* (1984) as meaningful beginnings for fresh insight about how our schools can be improved. These books are wonderfully true and humane but they require a curious and honest spirit.

My general experience is that many reformers have agendas separate from the welfare of children. If that is the case, I really know of nothing to offer those reformers that would possibly affect what they already believe. At the very least, I wish the critics of our schools would put aside the studies and committee recommendations long enough to inhabit a learner's reality. Reformers must learn that *efficiency* must be judged differently when dreams and lives are at stake. It is impossible to treat all children alike. Students are

not to be bullied and shamed into accepting mandated, prefabricated visions of success. There is nothing wrong with offering more opportunities in all academic areas if offerings in the arts and vocational training are equally diverse, plentiful, and respected. Instituting curriculums that recognize individual strengths and passions will pay the biggest dividends for our society whose cultural challenges are so diverse. In our diversity may lie the best hope for solving our common problems.

To people planning a teaching career, I would suggest that seeking self-understanding will prove as valuable as any methodology course. Understanding the beliefs that drive your own life may provide the strength to diminish obstacles standing between you and your students. As educators we cannot control the personal histories that children bring into our classrooms. If society is thick with violence, selfishness, drug addiction, broken homes, dishonesty, poverty and racial hatred, then each child will bring bits of those evils. What is too-often forgotten is that our students bring with them much of society's virtues as well. Pessimists excuse our failures saying that institutions can't be any better than the society they serve. Although monumental, it is our duty to build schools that are better than society. We cannot disregard unpleasant outside realities, but we can choose to make the worlds within our classroom walls better than the *real world's* pessimism.

Our lessons should reflect the actuality of life without drowning us all in despair and hopelessness. We owe our students schools that are physically and emotionally safe even when the neighborhoods that surround them are

not. In our individual classroom worlds, we should strive to make certain that justice and equality of opportunity reign whether or not that reflects the television's six o'clock news. We must foster environments and curriculums that reward risk taking, that encourage every child to dream and test a myriad of possible realities before leaving us. Through our actions we must assure our children that we value their uniqueness and their contributions to the community. To even partially accomplish such lofty things requires our educators to be courageous enough to believe and live the lessons they teach. Educators must also trust the uniqueness of their own gifts and do what they know is right even when it conflicts with what is expected. The institution is never worth more than the child.

"How can you think so little of me, when I think so much of you?" I once heard myself saying that to an inattentive class while I was trying to share something I thought was important. Teaching is personal. Don't accept the myth of the emotionally removed teacher, the objective, impartial *giver of knowledge*. Teaching is not work for technicians with scripted guidebooks. If you don't believe in the value of the lessons you teach, then you don't deserve a classroom or the love of children.

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form
for research being conducted under the auspices of
The University of Oklahoma, Norman Campus

Our Schools' Most Valuable Lessons

John R. Erwin, Principal Investigator

This document is an individual's consent for participation in the study entitled, "Our Schools' Most Valuable Lessons" being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation by the principal investigator, John R. Erwin, under the auspices of the Doctoral Program in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at the University of Oklahoma, Norman Campus. The purpose of this research is to investigate how people perceive and describe their most significant learning experiences. This investigation will attempt to lend to the current educational reform debates the voices of those most intimately involved with the educational process: the students, teachers, and graduates of our public schools.

If you decide to participate in this project, you may be asked to participate in one or more interview sessions which will last approximately one hour each or asked for your written responses to writing prompts. These interviews will be audio taped to insure that the information is gathered as accurately as possible. I see no foreseeable risks of participation in this project for you. Participation will help educators provide solutions to problems facing our public high schools. You may gain insight from participating in the study through discussing your own observations, insights, and theories concerning these issues and concerns.

Your participation in this project is strictly voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty in school or otherwise. You may withdraw at any time without penalty as well. To participate you must be 18 years of age or older. All information from this project, including transcripts of interviews and audio tapes, will be kept in a locked file cabinet by the principal investigator, and will remain confidential within limits of the law. The records will be destroyed at the conclusion of the investigation. A pseudonym will be given for you and your current setting so real names and locations will not be known.

As a participant you will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this project, please contact me at phone: (580) 492-5725. If you have questions about the study you may also contact Dr. Frank McQuarrie (405) 325-1523 or Dr. Linda McKinney (405) 325-1498 in the department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma, Norman Campus. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Oklahoma's Office of Research Administration at (405) 325-4757.

John R. Erwin
Doctoral Student, Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum

CONSENT STATEMENTS:
I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

_____ _____
Signature Date

I give my permission to audio tape my interviews.

_____ _____
Signature Date