

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: MINDING THE GAP: UNCOVERING
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
STARTING A SCHOOL

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This phenomenological study explores the lived experience of school founders.

My work is guided by the research question: “What is the lived experience of school founders from the time they conceive of starting a school through the first year of operation?” As phenomenology demands, my work is grounded in philosophy, and I turn to the writings of a wide variety of philosophers to inform the hermeneutic interpretation of the text. For methodological guidance, I rely on the work of Max van Manen.

Through the voices of participants, I excavate the essence of, and meaning beneath, their experiences.

The school founders’ experiences share certain essential elements. Being caught in a gap between existing schools and the schools they imagine emerges as a central theme, as each school founder discovers one or more gaps in the educational landscape s/he then seeks to fill. The journey includes rebellion against established norms with a

distinct philosophy and vision, and focus amidst a barrage of risks and naysayers.

Beneath this lies a sense of purpose and an obligation to develop other people's children.

School founders' experiences highlight various tensions in education today – the assumptions we make about “old” and “new” educational practices; how we select the values we wish to pass along to children; the ways in which we evaluate schools; the challenge of implementing new ideas; the role of parents in education; the lack of access many have to a free and appropriate education; and our general discomfort with change and reform.

The pedagogical insights from this study lead me to suggest that school founders share their practices and advice with one another and with others to enhance both new and existing schools. I also suggest we re-visit how to assess hard-to-measure outcomes, how to involve parents more in education, and how to move ideas from theory to implementation. Finally, I encourage education leaders to transform the education mindset to one that allows for a greater diversity of school options and choices for the benefit of both teachers and students.

MINDING THE GAP: UNCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
STARTING A SCHOOL

By

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DEDICATION:

To my Husband

David Burke Hawver

For being the best friend anyone could ever want

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CHAPTER 1:

SEEKING A SCHOOL OF DREAMS: TURNING TO THE PHENOMENON

“Do you want to know what I *really* think?” our professor offered in response to a classmate's query about the impact of American schools on the children who attend them. “I think public schools destroy children.” A couple of students gasped. Everyone else sat in stunned silence. After all, we were a classroom full of educators who considered ourselves to be good, caring, and effective developers of children. We would never hurt a child, let alone *destroy* one. Quite the opposite; we had come back to school to become even **better** educators than we already thought we were.

I looked around to see how my classmates were reacting to the professor's declaration. I had already come to the same conclusion on my own, but did not know if or how to let that be known. Slowly and tentatively, I began to nod my head in agreement. I had no reason to dispute what the professor was saying. In fact, the statement was something of a last straw for me, the last piece of evidence I needed to justify an active, decades-long search for schools that served all children well, or at least that did not wound or destroy any of them. I was discouraged. I hoped that the ongoing school reform movement sweeping the country at the time would help. But, after a semester studying school reform at the University of Maryland, I had learned that it is nearly impossible to reform existing schools. That same year, I watched as dysfunctional schools resisted change in my professional work, also suggesting that it is more effective to start a school from scratch than to try to re-build an existing one.

In her book, *Wounded by School*, Kirsten Olson recounts a similar experience she had at Harvard:

During one of my first seminars at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we students were sitting around a table explaining why we were studying at Harvard...Our teaching fellow, a founder of several schools and an instructor for 3 decades - a kind of wise elder at the graduate school with long, graying hair and glasses that bespoke much seeing - said, "I just didn't want school to hurt my children too much." I've never forgotten that. (Olson, 2009, p. 1)

What is the average parent or educator to do when s/he determines our schools are not serving children well? What does one do when s/he concludes that current practices, such as a lack of student engagement and obsolete curricula, create costs to our children and their future that are simply too high to bear? What are a parent's or teacher's alternatives if the local public school seems “wrong” for them or their children? The most common alternatives to the local public school are private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling.

Some parents choose to send their children to private schools. One drawback to sending a child to a private school is the financial burden; private schools typically charge tuition as opposed to public schools, which do not. And educators who choose to work at private schools typically earn lower salaries than they would at a public school. Charter schools, on the other hand, are public, so they pay teachers higher salaries and are free to all students. Homeschooling generally requires a financial sacrifice in that the homeschooling parent must forego earning an income outside the home in order to teach the family's children. A small group of parents and educators *start new schools* from scratch, schools of their own design that respond to what they feel is lacking in the educational options available to them. This group is the focus of my study.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore **the lived experience of starting a school**. In order to explore the phenomenon, I have chosen to draw on phenomenology as my methodological grounding. The following questions underlie my driving phenomenological question: Who are the people who start schools? What motivates them to do so, and what is the experience like for them? What do their actions mean, and how do they inform the field of education?

The rate at which people are starting schools is increasing in the United States. The number of charter schools alone has more than doubled from approximately 2,000 in 2001 to more than 5,000 in 2011.¹ And charter schools are not usually slightly modified versions of existing public schools. They tend to be quite different. According to the U.S. Charter Schools website:

Chartering is a radical educational innovation that is moving states beyond reforming existing schools to creating something entirely new. Chartering is at the center of a growing movement to challenge traditional notions of what public education means.
(http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/movement.htm)

This “growing movement” is producing many new schools, but it is difficult to say whether they are better than the schools we have. There are many conflicting reports on the outcomes of charter schools. Some studies claim they are a panacea for the ills of public schooling, while others, such as Diane Ravitch in her 2010 book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, paint a portrait of charter schools as inconsistent and problematic, and not nearly as effective, on average, as school reformers would have us believe.

¹ "Montgomery may get charter school" by Michael Alison Chandler, *Washington Post*, June 24, 2011, p. B1.

In addition to enrolling their children in a growing number of charter schools nationwide, more families are homeschooling their children than ever before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>), which conducts a survey every four years, there was a *36% increase* in the number of children homeschooled from 2003 to 2007, and 1.5 million children are now taught at home.² "Movement leaders suggest even higher estimates of around 2 to 2.5 million children currently being homeschooled" (Gaither, 2009, p. 12). If we extrapolate to the present, roughly 4% of school-aged children are now being homeschooled (Gray, 2011).

It is a common misconception that most families homeschool their children for religious reasons. In fact, only about 30% of homeschooled children are homeschooled due to their parents' religious or moral preferences (Gaither, 2009). That leaves **70%** of homeschooled students who are *not* homeschooled for religious reasons. This much larger group is homeschooled because their parents have concerns about school safety, are dissatisfied with academic instruction, or have geographic, health or other issues (such as a child actor or athlete) that make homeschooling a preferred option for them (National Household Education Survey Program report, *Homeschooling in the United States*, 2009). Various studies show that homeschooled students learn well, or at least outperform public and private school students on standardized achievement tests (Chang, Gold, & Meuse, 2011; Ray, 2000; Stone, 2011).

Detractors to homeschooling note that parents may not have the necessary skills to teach certain specialized subjects to their children and that homeschooled children might not develop appropriate social skills. Some parents cannot afford the resources

² This may be an underestimate. As the American Homeschool Statistics website points out, this number does not include the many homeschooling families that refuse to participate in surveys from the U.S government.

necessary to homeschool their children, especially if they have given up one family member's income. Nevertheless, the number *and diversity* of homeschooling families continues to rise. Pam Sorooshian describes her Southern California homeschooling cooperative in a National Home Education Network online forum:

My homeschooling group includes Moslem, Jewish, Quaker, Baptist, Messianic Jews, Pagan, Baha'i, atheist, agnostic, Catholic, unity, evangelicals, other Protestant denominations, and probably more. We have African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Middle Easterners, and other minorities. We have stay-at-home dads and single mothers. We are FAR more diverse than the neighborhood school I pulled my oldest child out of 10 years ago. (Gaither, 2009, p. 14)

Beginning in 1975, public schools began to lose students to alternative schools and to homeschooling (Hagerty, 1995, p. 5). What is causing this increase in charter schools, homeschooling, and the creation of new schools? Studies show that parents typically choose alternatives when they are dissatisfied with, or cannot find, what they want in their public schools (Williams, Hancher, & Hutner, 1983). Jennifer James, co-founder of the National African-American Homeschoolers Alliance, told the *St. Petersburg Times* in 2005, "Families are running out of options...parents are looking for alternatives" (Gaither, 2009, p. 13).

The Search for Alternatives

What is it about the local public school that motivates parents and teachers to seek alternative options? There may be a number of factors. Dozens of books and articles have been written recently about the problems facing American schools.³ Many have

³ For example, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010) by Diane Ravitch; *Retooling the Classroom for 21st Century Teaching* (2010) by Susan Fuhrman; *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future* (2010) by Linda Darling-Hammond; *Wounded by School* (2009) by Kirsten Olson;

pointed out that, while the world has changed, our education system generally has not. As the United States economy has transformed from a national manufacturing base to a global 21st century information technology and knowledge economy, the skills required for success in life and work have changed. It is impossible for students to learn these new and necessary skills from an educational system that has been in place since the early 1900s and is now obsolete (Darling-Hammond, 2010). That there is a gap between what many schools teach and what a child needs to know and be able to do as she enters adulthood has been documented for decades, but has produced little change in many of our schools.

So-called “traditional” approaches to learning, teaching, and teacher education worked very well in the early part of the 20th century. This was a time when high school graduates could land a factory job that would support both their family and the nation’s gross domestic product.

For nearly the entire 20th century, two figures of speech – stated as either analogies or metaphors – have dominated much of the thinking about schools, learning, teaching, and teacher education... These analogies and metaphors are 1) schools are like factories and should be run by tight business-like management techniques; and 2) teaching is like a craft in which work is routine. In these analogies, workers do what supervisors tell them to do and new practitioners simply follow the practice of their more experienced masters. (Myers & Simpson, 1998, p. 2)

Today, our country no longer revolves around the manufacturing sector to the same extent. According to business guru Peter Drucker, our need for blue-collar workers

Back to the Basics of Teaching and Learning (2008) by David Jardine et al.; *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005) by Jonathan Kozol; *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education* (2003) by Pedro Noguera; *Revisiting The Culture of The School and The Problem of Change* (1996) by Seymour Sarason; and *Crisis of Confidence in American Education* (1995) by Robert Hagerty.

fell more rapidly between 1950 and the 1990s than at any other time in history (Drucker, 1994). At the same time, information services grew from one-third to more than half the economy in the 30 years between 1967 and 1997 (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 4). As our productivity as a nation has come to depend less and less on manufactured goods and more and more on innovation, information management and entrepreneurship, citizens must learn to think, analyze, synthesize information, and be creative (Drucker, 1994).

Higher-level thinking skills are more important than ever before (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Drucker, 1994; and Friedman, 2005). Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* (2005) specifically warns that our children will fail to be productive citizens unless they can learn how to think critically and creatively about the complex problems that face the world. They will be occupying "jobs that do not yet exist, creating ideas and solutions for products and problems that have not yet been identified using technologies that have not yet been invented" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 2). More than ever, then, children need an education appropriate to their future in "a world in which a failure to learn is fast becoming an insurmountable defeat" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 2).

According to Linda Darling-Hammond, the structure of our schools must change because the current structure makes educational success for all students impossible. "In the view of most educators, parents, employers, and students our current education system is failing. Rigid and bureaucratic, it was never designed to teach all children effectively" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. xi). Furthermore, she writes, "Teaching in many schools is managed by procedures that hold little chance of producing satisfying learning" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 4). Finally, "These features remain substantially

in place in most U.S. schools," despite decades of reform (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 5).

Outdated teaching methods and a focus on assessing students are counter-productive and rob some children of a love of learning. "Traditional teaching...with a focus on rote-learning [is] one of the main reasons for unmotivated students" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 6). In her book, *Wounded by School*, Kirsten Olson asks, "Does [our] 19th- and early 20th-century sorting and tracking institution still serve us well as a society? Does it engage most learners? What are the costs for most students in passing through American education?" (Olson, 2009, p. 7).

Recent documentaries also elucidate the declining state of American education. The documentary "Waiting for Superman" (2010) demonstrates in a number of ways how the American school system is failing to serve its poorest children. The documentary "Race to Nowhere" (2009) argues that the school system is not adequately serving children in wealthy, high-achieving districts, either. In his documentary, "The Finland Phenomenon" (2011), Harvard's Tony Wagner shows that Finland's educational system is far superior to ours.

Although there are many complex reasons for the shortcomings of our educational system – from changes in our economy and our population to the underfunding of schools, underqualified teachers, and "rigid, thoughtless curriculum mandates" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. xiii), these problems are not insurmountable. It is possible for us to have better schools. This, in part, motivates people to start their own schools.

Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions

What is it like for those who question popular educational practices? What brings them to the point of saying, “enough” and starting their own school? Though reluctant to admit it at first, I felt an enormous sense of relief at hearing my professor propose that public schools destroy children. Finally, someone had confirmed my growing sense that transformative changes are necessary in education if we are going to eliminate destructive practices and graduate happy, healthy, motivated children who are ready for their future rather than our past. While I acknowledged the professor’s choice of words might be a bit sensationalist, I was relieved that someone was willing to stand up and state what seemed obvious to me, no matter how stark, unattractive or inconvenient the message might be.

Inevitably, when I share the statistics on the increasing number of families opting out of the “regular” public school system today, someone will point out that not *every* school is failing our children. Others will argue that it is not possible for a public system to educate every child well. Still others rightly point out that new schools are not a panacea, either. Like regular public schools, new schools are simply trying to fill an unmet need.

The question then becomes, what is an acceptable rate of failure? What percentage of children are we willing to sacrifice over the altar of serving the others? At what point is it unacceptable (and, in extreme circumstances, even negligent) for parents to continue to send their children to a particular school if the school is failing to educate them appropriately? How much failure can we as a society tolerate and justify? Are those who opt out of the system naively seeking an impossible ideal, or simply removing

their children from what they consider to be a destructive situation? Isn't there a way to ensure success for more students?

In the 2010 Annual Report for Teachers College, the institution's President writes, "75 percent of all high school graduates nationwide [are] deficient in literacy skills" (Fuhrman, 2010, p. 3). On February 7, 2011, New York State education officials released a new set of graduation statistics that showed that *fewer than half* of students in the state were leaving high school prepared for college and well-paying careers, and only 23 percent of students in New York City graduated "ready" for college or careers in 2009. Other large urban districts in New York are faring even more poorly. "In Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers, *less than 17 percent* of students met the proposed standards, including just *5 percent* in Rochester" (Otterman, 2011). How can we defend a system like Rochester's in which 95% of students do not meet the proposed standards?

For those of us who evaluate the success of our schools partly by the number of students who complete high school and partly by the number who are ready to tackle college or a career, it is clear we are failing far too many children. As stewards of our country and as the adults charged with raising the next generation of citizens, how can we justify these outcomes? To me, it is surprising more people do not pull their children out of the system. The barriers to doing so must be high in a system where failure is so pervasive. What motivates certain individuals to turn their backs on the system and start their own school? What is this experience like for them?

My experiences as a student, teacher, parent, and professional have changed my beliefs about and perspective on education. What I have learned challenges my prior understanding about education and has made me question what many schools are doing

today. In my work funding science education projects across the country, I see far too few schools implementing the successful strategies I have read about in the educational literature. As a result, I have discarded what I so badly *want* to believe about our schools - and what many proclaim - that they are the best in the world and could not be doing any better.

The practice of questioning the taken-for-granted is central to hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. In doing a phenomenological study, we are encouraged to question our everyday assumptions about the world. For me, this approach has carried over into my thinking about schools, and I now find it easier than ever to question the status quo. In his book, *Punished by Rewards*, educator Alfie Kohn (1993) contends that we should continually question our assumptions and look for the unexpected in the world. He writes:

Most things that we and the people around us do constantly... have come to seem so natural and inevitable that merely to pose the question, 'Why are we doing this?' can strike us as perplexing - and also, perhaps, a little unsettling. On general principle, it is a good idea to challenge ourselves in this way about anything we have come to take for granted; the more habitual, the more valuable this line of inquiry. (pp. 13-14)

Along with questioning my long-held beliefs about the supremacy and effectiveness of the practices of the American school system, I find myself in a struggle to reconcile various contradictory messages I have received about education and our future role in it.

The first message I hear is this: Our educational system isn't as bad as everyone is making it out to be. It has many strong qualities, and there are many excellent schools. There may be a few poor teachers out there, but there are also many good ones. The idea that, in some fundamental way, schools are *wounding* or *destroying* children is ridiculous.

The structure, content, and pedagogy employed by schools today have existed for the past 100 years. There is a reason why these institutions are the way they are, and it took them a long time to get there. They have been shaped and fueled by forces larger than any of us: history, politics, the public will, finances, college requirements, laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act, American values, social issues, the changing nature of labor, the needs of businesses, etc. *Do not try to change these things; you will be wasting your time.* "Seventy percent of organization change efforts fail" (Fuhrman, 2010, p. 1). School systems are too complex, too large, and too entrenched to change. And they are doing a good job for most children. The system worked for us, didn't it? So, leave well enough alone. *Find a way to fit in, follow the rules, and do the best you can from within the system.*

The contrasting message is: The school system is destroying both our children and our economy and neither may ever recover. Our children are not growing up to be happy, healthy, productive adults, which puts our society and our chances for a bright and peaceful future in danger. Our schools desperately need to be changed. *What are you waiting for? Get out there and DO something!*

I accept both messages as possible and important, but they leave me in a no-win situation. What is the proper action to take when faced with such divergent, pronouncements, each with its own set of supporting evidence? Kids are being destroyed, I am hearing, but I am also hearing there is nothing I can do about it. Even the new President of the institution for which I worked until December, 2012, stated in *Science* magazine that K-12 education is "too big a nut to crack" (Kaiser, 2008, p. 35). He then proceeded to undo our K-12 programming and funding and, when there was

nothing left for me to do, eliminated my job. But the guilt of sitting back and doing nothing while children were purportedly being destroyed was, and is, too unsettling for me. Not doing anything feels like being complicit in a crime.

A rising sense of duty and impatience motivated me to search for people who *were* doing something to substantially improve education. Maybe I could join forces with them? In my search, I found a small group of people taking steps to make a difference by starting brand new schools. By starting new schools, these school founders were demonstrating quite clearly that they fell into the second “camp” described above. All had been teachers for varying lengths of time, but at some point, rather than continue to influence existing schools from within, they had decided to step outside the box and start their own schools.

Does everyone who rejects the status quo experience this feeling I had of being both traitor and liberator, I wondered. Does the experience feel the same to each person? These questions are partly what led me to my interest in the **lived experience of starting a school**. In the next section, I step back for a moment to retrace my journey as a student, educator, and parent in order to explain what brought me to this place, reveal my own biases, and open up the phenomenon.

My Schooling Experience

From Kindergarten through high school, I lived in four different towns in two different states. For ten years, I went to a variety of public schools. In the 7th and 8th grades, I attended a private girls’ school. I didn’t mind going to school at first. As a preschooler I looked forward to going to the “big kids” Kindergarten my older brother attended every day. I was generally fond of my teachers; indeed, I remember

accidentally calling my second grade teacher “Mom” a couple of times. But, as the years wore on, school became less and less joyful for me.

Obedience

When the boys acted up in third grade, the teacher canceled both our field trip and our science experiment about ice. I thought this was terribly unfair. How could she punish us all for the sins of the few? Was it our responsibility as their classmates to keep the fidgety boys in line? How could we do that if the teacher could not? We were eight.

A large part of what I was learning in school was how to be organized, compliant, obedient, and on time. I found any rote memorization to be mind-numbing and completely disconnected from real life, but it was a large part of what we did. Linda Darling-Hammond writes, “Most students were trained in the basic workplace socialization they would need to conduct simple tasks neatly, punctually, and obediently. The rote learning that satisfied these early twentieth-century objectives still predominates in today’s schools” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 17). And so, I did whatever was put in front of me and sat obediently at the end of every day, hands folded on my desk. I stared at the cursive alphabet above the chalkboard and traced the letters with my eyes to keep from fidgeting until I was dismissed. I wanted to comply. I did not want to make the teacher angry or be the last one excused for the day.

When my younger sister had to repeat third grade and was struggling with math, she concluded that she was just stupid. Her failure to progress made her hate herself. I wanted her to feel better, so I decided to be her teacher at home. I tried to help her, but I did not have the skills or materials necessary to do so. Instead, I retreated to my room, drew up imaginary class lists of students with names I liked or did not like, and then

proceeded to give them all arbitrary grades. Was that my image of what teachers did? Is that what I would do if I became a “real” teacher someday?

At the end of sixth grade, I had a sobering thought, “I am only halfway there.” My next thought was just as distressing, “Can I really do this for another six years?” It seemed unimaginable that I would ever get through another six years of school. I had a similar thought going into my senior year of high school. “Do I really need to do this?” I remember asking my grandmother. “Haven’t I proved myself enough? Can’t they just let me go to college?” I had shown I could be compliant. I had come to see school not as a place to get an education, but as a place where children jump through a series of hoops in order to be moved along. I did not think I would learn enough during my senior year of high school to justify the time and effort required to get through it. And that is all I was doing by then - getting through it. I would have preferred to drop out of school and do something different and interesting, something real, something useful.

Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?
(from “Early Spring” in Wordsworth, 1889, p. 84)

The Disappearance of Joy

Every year, it seemed, I had more trouble sitting through my classes, and yet the pressure to “toe the line” and earn high grades also was increasing. I felt trapped, as if school were crushing me. I had lost any love of learning that I had managed to hang onto through the years. A school founder who had a similar experience describes being “pierced” by his schooling and summarizes its effect in this way:

I went to kindergarten as a happy child, with a vast imagination and enormous amount of enthusiasm for learning. However, throughout the years in the traditional

educational system, I lost a lot of my happiness, imagination, and enthusiasm. It all faded away... (Olson, 2009, p. 5)

Part of what caused me to enjoy learning less and less every year was that the content of my classes was alternately boring, joyless, fragmented and confusing. Many classes focused on the short-term retrieval of facts, facts I forgot shortly after the exam. History consisted of memorizing men's names and the dates of the wars they fought. I could not relate to it at all. Olson writes of the ultimately successful people she interviewed for her book: "They began to experience learning as something almost painfully disconnected from themselves - *as something they must do*" (Olson, 2009, p. 35).

My education offered me a simplified version of the way the world works that was not only inaccurate at times, but was not terribly relevant to my life, then or now. According to Gardener and Boix-Mansilla, our education system still misleads children in this way:

Students of physics believe in forces that can be mysteriously transmitted from one substance or agent to another; students of biology think of evolution as a planful, teleological process, culminating in the perfect human being, students of algebra plug numbers into an equation with hardly a clue as to what the equation means or when (and when *not*) to invoke it; students of history insist on applying the simplest stereotypical models to the elucidation of events that are complex and multifaceted. (as cited in Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2002, p. 93)

Joy Rediscovered Briefly

I knew that not all schools were alike. I knew there were schools that were more engaging than mine and that school did not have to be a joyless grind. Back in the seventh grade, I had accompanied a friend after school to pick up her four year-old sister

at a nearby preschool. I expected to see what I had experienced in preschool myself and what I had seen at my younger brother's preschool - groups of hyperactive children running and shouting and building towers of blocks so they could knock them down. Maybe there would be one quieter little girl painting a picture.

What I saw instead changed my life. Thirty little 3, 4, and 5 year-olds were quietly but happily playing alone or in small groups all around the room. Some were at little tables; others were working on the floor on little preschooler-sized rugs. The room was orderly, and the children were all busy and intent on what they were doing. Most were working very deliberately with blocks, beads, or little plastic animals. One little child put a pile of tiles back into a plastic container, rolled up his rug, returned the container to its place on a shelf across the room, and carefully stowed the rug in a barrel with a dozen other rugs. All by himself. He must have been three.

We found my friend's sister playing with a balance, carefully placing appropriately weighted, labeled, colored, and proportionally-sized blocks on either side. The block marked "2" was two units squared and the block marked "3" was three units squared. When she put blocks marked "1" and "2" in one pan of the balance and a block marked "3" on the other side, the pans balanced perfectly. She continued to try different combinations of blocks to see what would happen, taking one off and adding another in turn. She did not want to stop playing. What a wonderful, joyful, natural way to learn addition, I thought.

In retrospect, what I saw at that preschool was children acquiring fundamental skills in math and language arts without knowing they were learning. To them, what they were doing was play. I was amazed and intrigued by these children. How is this

possible, I wondered? Can children really learn just by playing? Can they learn without knowing they are learning? Can they learn without a teacher standing over them telling them what to do? Can they learn with joy and without boredom or stress or pressure or time limits or the threat of grades? Can they learn without surrendering their imagination and creativity? It seemed as though these children were doing all these things.

Preschoolers were teaching themselves important concepts and life skills at their own pace rather than passively under a teacher's one-size-fits-all direction. This school made sense to me, and I began to wonder why every school didn't teach children in this way. I remember wishing I had gone to school there. I wished I had learned math as effortlessly and joyfully as my friend's sister was learning it, rather than completing dozens of unimaginative worksheets. It would have been a lot more fun, I thought, and I would have been able to *see* the concepts and *feel* them, and maybe even remember them better and in more meaningful ways.

My own preschool and Kindergarten had been so different, and my current (private) school was so different, too. According to Olson, my experience was, and is, however quite common:

Choice and self-direction were eliminated or were too narrowly defined, shame or fear of making mistakes became [students'] strongest associations with learning new tasks, and a deeper understanding of what made learning vital and meaningful was rarely in view. Subsequently, almost without realizing it, they lost their pleasure in learning. (Olson, 2009, p. 35)

Although I had attended four distinct schools by that time, all had been similar in structure and instructional style. The preschool I was visiting was vastly different. It dawned on me then that all schools are not alike, and perhaps some are more conducive

to learning than others. I began to have hope that there existed schools that were more inspiring, creative, and full of wonder than others. It was 1973, a time when upheaval and radical change were socially popular. I assumed the preschool was a newfangled type of radical school, one that might exist in greater numbers in the future. (It turns out it wasn't; it was a "traditional" Montessori school.) On an impulse, right then and there, standing in the doorway of that preschool, I vowed to send *my* children to a school like *that one*. I was 13.

Compliance

After 7th grade, I diligently marched through another five years of school with as much focus and obedience as I could muster. During that time, I re-learned every year that what was most important was being *compliant*. I followed the rules. I didn't cause trouble. I did my homework, even when it seemed like a waste of time. My grades were high, and my teachers were happy. As my friend Linda, a veteran middle school math teacher, explains, "What we as educators want is for children to learn to read and follow written directions, and listen to and follow oral directions." But, as Olson cautions, "We need to learn to comply in order to get along in our culture, but excessive compliance is the enemy of creativity and high-level thinking" (Olson, 2009, p. 40). Joan Goodman adds, "We have succumbed to a system of coercion rather than one of education" (2011, p. 22).

Why are so many schools structured the way they are? Are there compelling reasons for the lack of change in this structure over time? After all, it has taken over 100 years for our schools to get this way. Have school systems reached a state of perfect

homeostasis that allows us to educate the masses in the best way possible, or do tradition and size make turning the educational ship around nearly impossible?

How strong is the so-called hidden curriculum today, the part of the curriculum that emphasizes outcomes such as obedience and compliance? If someone thinks there is a better way to educate children, how open is the educational system to his or her ideas? Are private school, homeschooling, unschooling, or starting one's own school compelling options?

A Lasting Inspiration

What I had experienced at the preschool stayed with me. I have never forgotten it. I started to think about becoming a teacher. I thought maybe I could replicate the joy, earnestness, motivation, imagination, creativity, and learning I saw there. Could I do that as a teacher? Were there other schools like that in which I could teach or enroll my own (future) children?

From that point on, replicating what I had seen at the Montessori preschool became something of a calling for me. I eventually went on to earn a teaching certificate, taught high school science in Pennsylvania, New York City, Maryland, Washington, DC and Costa Rica, earned a Master's degree in education, worked in higher education administration and educational consulting, and started a Ph.D. program in Education.

Thirty-five years after stepping foot in that preschool, I have learned a lot about education and have consulted to and worked for at least 40 different schools. To this day, nothing I have experienced in education has stirred me as much as what I saw and felt that day. After I married and had two children, I went looking for a similar preschool, and yes, found one in which to enroll my children.

As my children flourished in a local Montessori school, I studied the school casually. I wanted to know who had started the school, and when and why. I wondered what made it so special. Was it the Montessori method? The teachers? The Head of School? Many things about the school made sense to me and I wondered why more schools did not have the same structure and philosophy. Why couldn't children have this same education at our local public school? I wondered if I could somehow bring the best aspects of Montessori education to the masses. Could I do that from the inside by transforming existing schools, or would I have to start a private or charter school? What would such an undertaking entail? I realized I needed to learn more from educators who already had walked this road. How did they make the decision to start a school? What was it like to start a school? Could I do this myself someday?

Becoming an Educator

“Could you teach my children science?” the nun was asking me. I was a junior in college, and one of the requirements of my Introduction to Education class was that I *observe* an actual classroom once a week. I had been assigned to a nearby parochial school 4th grade class in which discipline and conformity were front and center.

Discipline and Conformity

Sister Maryrose, the nun at the front of the room was very much in charge. The children did their best to meet her expectation that they sit quietly and attentively while pinned to their little chairs. The children wore uniforms and sat at their desks, which were arranged in neat rows.

In our present day schools, [the] children are repressed in all the spontaneous expressions of their individuality as if they were dead things, and are fixed in their respective places on the benches like butterflies transfixed with a pin,

whilst they spread abroad the wings of the knowledge
acquired in the driest fashion. (Montessori, 1948/2004, p.
8)

The stricture of the classroom, and the focus on sameness, took me back to my own days in elementary school years earlier, sitting with my hands folded, tracing the letters with my eyes, waiting to be dismissed.

What mattered most at this school was obedience and conformity. On the school's 4th grade web page today, the most prominent message says, in very large letters, "Please make sure your uniform shirt is tucked into your pants and you are wearing a belt!" Given all the messages that could be posted in large letters on the 4th grade home page, it is telling that this one was chosen. Does their education really hinge on this?

On my first afternoon in her classroom, Sister Maryrose spent much of the time criticizing, admonishing, and angrily re-directing the children. She seemed especially exasperated by one little boy. She repeatedly chastised him, although I could never figure out what his crime was. He was called "stupid" in front of the entire class, and as he was leaving at the end of the day, she turned to me, sighed loudly enough for him to hear, and said, "James is just so lazy! If he would try harder sometimes, maybe he wouldn't be such a failure." As her words sliced through him, I saw James's body shrink and curl. Clearly, Sister Maryrose felt she was doing this for James's benefit, though his body language suggested he had been seriously injured, not helped. Is this what Maxine Greene refers to as the "killing" that is done "for the child's own good" (in Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2008, p. 83)? I do not know. All I remember is that I nearly broke into tears after I left that day. Olson writes:

The individuals I spoke to felt that school was not just benign or neutral - it had fractured them...These stories

began to fit together in patterns - patterns of laceration and rupture around common educational practices for which we seemed to have no language and were largely, in the education profession, in the business of denying. (Olson, 2009, p. 4)

Sister Maryrose's classroom provided fuel for my growing desire to create an educational environment that would bring children like James both joy and a love of learning, an environment devoid of potentially "destructive, dangerous, and often unnecessarily searing and difficult" experiences many children endure at one time or another in school (Olson, 2009, p. 4).

At the time, I did not question Sister Maryrose's methods, nor did I question her right to "discipline" her students. Her teaching style was both common and widely accepted. I did not expect much support if I questioned what she was doing. But, I felt terribly sorry for James, as being in school seemed to scare and deflate him rather than develop him into a confident, happy person. In my travels to schools around the country today, I still see this soul-crushing, disrespectful behavior toward children in almost every school I visit. Olson concurs, "The eagerness to learn that we all bring into the world as infants is often diminished and even destroyed by our schooling" (Olson, 2009, p. xv).

"Who [is] paying attention to the psychological and spiritual experiences of little kids?" Olson asks (2009, p. 2). Darling-Hammond adds, "Growing up humane and decent people who can appreciate others and take satisfaction in doing things well requires schools that model humanity and decency, that cultivate appreciation" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 31). In a more recent work, Darling-Hammond adds that teachers should "model and teach students a consistent set of respectful, responsible behaviors"

(Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 117) to support their positive self-identities and healthy development.

Where are all the nurturing, motivating, safe schools, the ones that treat students with humanity and decency, I wondered, the schools that make children glad to go to school every day and that make them happy to learn? There were times when I resigned myself to the educational situation in which I found myself and tried to justify it. There were times when I accepted the justifications of others. Inevitably, however, the image I had of happy preschool children would remind me that school does not have to be this way; there *are* viable alternatives. I still did not know how to make change happen, however. I had not yet taught a class or worked in a school in any capacity.

First Steps

Once the children were gone, Sister Maryrose turned her attention to me. A brief, casual introduction revealed that I was studying Biology at a local college. She lit up. “Could you teach my children science?” she suggested. “They don’t get much from me.” “Uh..... sure,” I stammered. I was not confident I was ready to teach anything to anyone, but I was willing to try. I felt a huge weight blanket my body. It was the weight of a whole classroom full of children being entrusted to my care. At the same time, I felt empowered. I now had an opportunity to try to show these children that school could be fun and rewarding like it was at the preschool I had visited during 7th grade.

Sister Maryrose did not have a science curriculum, so I designed one, week by week, primarily based on the interests of the kids. I tried to awaken their creativity and ignite their imagination wherever I could. We studied animals and plants. We had a heated discussion one day about whether it was ethical to keep animals in zoos, and we

traveled to my college campus to wander the woods, see the creek, experience nature, and collect seeds. The children particularly loved going outside. I wondered why I was never taken outside as an elementary school student. Was it too difficult to control us outside the classroom? I found I didn't have to "control" the kids very much when we were outside. They were generally engaged and happy. TheodoreSizer addresses the disconnect between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on outside it:

Our students are already experiencing a world that is much richer, much more difficult and challenging, much more alluring and full of adventure than the version of the world made available in many classrooms. (in Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006, p. xviii)

I felt good about what I was doing. I was relaxed and happy when I was with the kids. I loved them, and we were accomplishing a lot together. James proved to be a delightful and curious child, and I derived particular satisfaction from his engagement with my lessons and with me. He was wonderful company when we went into the woods. He ran around happily and collected more different kinds of seeds than anyone else. He taped his seeds to a piece of construction paper and proudly showed them to me. We tried to decide how each seed might be transported - did it look like it could be blown by the wind or attach itself to an animal's fur? I watched him hold the paper out excitedly to his mother when she came to pick him up.

It was frustrating to think that, when I left, James might again be pinned to his little desk and yelled at when he squirmed. I wondered why Sister Maryrose treated him the way she did. Did she feel she was working in his best interest? Was she simply teaching him the same way she had been taught? Did she think she was preparing him for "real" life? Was there anything I could do to change things for James, to protect his

fragile, developing sense of self and to ensure that he would feel treasured? Was there any way to ensure that he would become an eager, lifelong learner? Would enrolling James in a public school have been any better?

I knew there were schools in which a child's eagerness to learn was not destroyed. Where were those schools? Where were the schools in which James might be treated with compassion and where he would blossom? Where were the schools in which *every* child would be treated well *every* day? Do such schools exist, or was I making too much of a very brief experience in 7th grade? I kept looking for those schools. It was about this time that I started to think seriously about starting my own school if I could not find a school that met my expectations.

The Search Continues

"Could you just teach my classes for me?" I was now a senior in college and I had to complete a certain number of weeks of "student teaching" to earn my teaching certification. On my first day, I left the college campus at 6:30 am and walked to the local public high school to meet my Supervising Teacher. Right away, he explained to me that the high school would be closing at the end of the semester. All students and teachers were to be folded into another high school. He was responsible for combining the two existing science departments – personnel, books, supplies, classrooms, curricula, etc. "Oh, and did I mention I am running the tri-state Science Fair this spring?" he added. "Could you just teach my classes for me?" "Uh.... sure," I answered, again, with a little less trepidation this time. And with that, he was gone. I did not see him again until I needed a recommendation for a full-time teaching job. In it, he wrote that I was always

dressed professionally in a skirt and blouse. He had nothing to say about my teaching. I taught all of his classes for an entire semester, but he never came by to see me teach.

This was eye-opening for me. What would have happened to the students that semester if I had not been there to teach them? Who was watching the store? It was clear my Supervising Teacher had no time to devote to them. He was completely buried by administrative duties. But, wasn't he taking a huge risk by turning his classes over to me? I had absolutely no experience teaching high school science. What if I was a terrible teacher? I wasn't, but didn't these kids matter? Wasn't teaching students a priority here? I had never before considered that there could be anything more important to a school than student learning. I was now open to the reality that, even if student learning is the goal of a school, the reality and complexity of every teacher's situation can easily disrupt a hyper-focused march toward this goal. I felt frustrated and lost at once, frustrated by the lack of care shown for students, and lost in that I had lost some of my idealism to a large dose of reality.

One class I taught at the high school was a so-called "low" ninth grade class composed mostly of boys no one else wanted to teach. I imagined James ending up in this class someday. My job was to cover an introductory physical science curriculum the students found to be irrelevant and unreachable. I managed to get us through a unit on weather by changing the lessons substantially to relate them to everyday life. We built our own weather instruments and used them to collect weather data.

Soon, I realized the curriculum was not going to work for them (or me). It was designed as more of a vocabulary drill than anything. Olson contends that this is not unusual: "Students most often are being asked to do very low-level work...students in

80% of American schools are typically working at the one or two lowest levels of cognitive demand...[with an] emphasis on rote memorization and low levels of cognitive work" (Olson, 2009, p. 61). Where, I wondered, were the other 20% of schools that do **not** relegate their students to a diet of memorization and regurgitation? If I were to teach one day, I wanted to teach at one of them.

I asked the kids what they wanted to learn more about. "Snakes" came the reply. They were interested in snakes. The next thing I knew, they had purchased a snake on their own, named him "Sam" and brought him to live in a tank in our classroom. I brought them articles from the college library that described the physics of how snakes move. They found other materials and eagerly learned all they could. They were engaged every day. When Sam died, they dissected him. They wanted to look at his muscles and bones to see how they worked together to make him move.

I wondered why everyone had such low expectations for these kids. They seemed quite capable to me. The curriculum I was supposed to teach just did not seem right for them. Jardine et al., explain, "Curriculum is not [to be] delivered to [students] through fragmented activities made up by others; it is [to be] created with them" (Jardine et al., 2008, pp. 21-22). "If we really want our children to face the challenges of the twenty-first century with confidence and skill, we need to teach them not only that they can acquire current knowledge, but also that they have voices that can shape what their society comes to accept as knowledge" (p. 23).

I found myself in an uncomfortable place between what I was expected to do and what I felt would serve these children well. Who was I to question the established curriculum and not teach it? No one else seemed to be questioning it, and the students

weren't thriving but they also were not complaining. Who was I to question educators with far more experience than I? Aoki writes about living in this place, between "planned" and "lived" curricula (in Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 73). He contends that, in order to negotiate the space, the type of educational improvisation I employed should be an essential feature of every teacher's practice. Pinar adds, "'Improvisation' is a powerful notion that not only allows us to emphasize the creativity of teaching, but enables us to 'hear' the relation between theory and practice" (Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 82). However, I had not been given permission to improvise that semester, and I was worried I would be "found out" and shown the door.

I was very conflicted about my non-compliance. What if the children really needed to know the material I was not teaching them? What if they were never exposed to it again? Would my omissions harm them in some way? Fortunately, my Supervising Teacher was too busy to notice what I was (and was not) doing, so he never spoke to me about it. One benefit to me was that I was able to take some risks and try different teaching methods to see how they worked. Whether or not I was a good teacher, the point is that I felt I had gotten away with something by not teaching the "right" content, and by not teaching in a traditionally accepted way. Also, I was not getting useful feedback on my teaching, and did not feel I "belonged" at the school.

On one level, I felt lonely and powerless. I was working by myself without any guidance at all. I was never given the opportunity to see another teacher teach, and I was observed only once by a professor from my college who evaluated me for certification purposes. I had expected to learn how to teach in an environment in which teachers were like family, helping each other to improve their practices and cheering each other on.

According to Olson (2009), my situation was not entirely unique in that, "Teachers find their profession off-puttingly isolating, lacking in community, mentorship, and teamwork, ever more complex and undercapitalized. Fifty percent of new teachers will leave the sector within the first 5 years of teaching" (p. 60). I could certainly see how a new teacher might not receive the support s/he needed to develop new skills and feel part of a learning community.

After teaching four classes a day for a semester, I felt I had refined my craft through a great deal of trial and error. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something missing. This was not the sort of school at which I wanted to teach or to which I would send my own children. Both St. Christopher's and the high school lacked the positive and productive energy of the preschool I had visited in 7th grade. The teachers and children seemed less happy, less friendly, and less confident. Children did not work at their own pace; they were expected to move through a lock-step curriculum together, and the class moved forward whether everyone was ready or not. I wanted to teach in a school in which I could meet the children where they were and blow wind into their sails to carry them farther than they thought they could ever go. I did not want to shove curricula down their throats. I didn't like doing it and neither did they. Again, I entertained the idea of starting my own school, a school that would be a wonderful and productive place for teachers and students alike. I pictured teaming up with some of my friends, who were also working on their teaching certification, to start the perfect school together.

By the time I graduated from college, I was certified to teach. I had now taught at a Catholic School and a public school, and neither seemed "right." I decided I might

have more freedom to teach what and how I wanted to at a private school. I accepted a position teaching Earth Science and Biology at a private high school in New York City. The school had a reputation for being “progressive” and “creative.” Indeed, it was the school of choice for the children of famous New York-based entertainers and artists. I hoped this would be a creative school where I could implement everything I had learned about teaching and learning.

Sadly, the school had more of a “stand and deliver” culture than I had expected. Although I found this to be an easy way to teach, I knew it was not the best way for children to learn. It had not worked for me as a student, and it had not worked for the students I had taught up to that point. The “sage on a stage” culture of a single teacher at the front of the class responsible for delivering material to the students simply flew in the face of everything I knew by then. I did not see the role of teachers as providers in an *information dissemination* business:

Some [teachers] believe, for example, that they are in the "information dissemination" business. This was a reasonable business [in the past]. (But then, so was the horseshoe business and the candle-snuffer business.) The signs that their business is failing are abundant, but they keep at it all the more diligently. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 13)

Taylor adds:

[Teachers] want to pass on to their pupils all the ideas that have excited them. They want to save their students time, frustration, mistaken steps. [Teachers] are bursting with energy and ideas, overflowing with information, anxious to be as efficient as possible in the transmission of the material they have garnered and which they consider important and worthy. (1991, p. 352)

They (teachers) keep at it anyway, all the more diligently. They close their classroom doors and continue trying to disseminate information despite “signs that their business is failing.”

Nobel laureate and White House Advisor Carl Wieman's research on teaching physics at the college level demonstrates that the “stand and deliver” lecture-style educational model is a terribly inefficient way to impart knowledge. His study shows that a full 93% of what is taught in a lecture is typically forgotten and “students learn better when they are motivated, fully engaged, and learning in teams, with instructors guiding a process that encourages them to think and solve problems” (Zambon, Lempinen, Wieman, & AAAS Senior Scientists, 2011). Although I felt guilty every time I “lectured” to a class, as a young teacher, I also worried about trying to teach in a different way. What if my “different” methods didn't work? What if someone discovered I was teaching in a non-traditional way and did not approve?

The Conflicted Self

I spent my first year of teaching moving slowly from being a teacher who directed every aspect of the classroom to one who let my students plan and teach lessons to each other. I found the students to be marvelously engaging teachers, and the techniques they chose when I let them teach their peers reminded me how they learned best. During my second year of teaching, my methods became more unconventional. Again, I worried about possible repercussions. What if the department head walks in and sees that I am not always “teaching”?

I had become two incompatible beings residing in a single body: a compliant one and a more rebellious one. The compliant one valued what I had learned in school and

was pretty sure non-compliance would be punished. The rebellious one refused to ignore the lessons I had learned from experience and my growing sense that I could change some small piece of the world for the better. It was difficult to turn my back on my childhood, my education, my parents, my teachers, my colleagues and everyone else. I worried that my rebellious ideas about education might harm my relationships with others and isolate me. I could not bear the thought. I was torn between being two very different people. I was facing what felt like a no-win situation.

Little by little, I gained confidence in my choices and what they meant for both myself and my students. I knew I was taking the road less traveled and, while still conflicted, became increasingly convinced it was the right road. Do people who start their own schools have this same realization at some point? Do they make a conscious decision to take the road less traveled because they do not like where the road *more* traveled ends?

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Frost, 1916, p. 9)

A quick review of the history of education uncovers a long and steady stream of educational renegades, people who also took the road less traveled and made a difference: Socrates, Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Horace Mann, Anne Sullivan, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Howard Gardner, John Dewey, Rudolf Steiner, Maxine Greene, Ivan Illich, Nel Noddings, TheodoreSizer and Linda Darling-Hammond to name a few. While some of their ideas took hold and spread widely, other ideas have not made it into the mainstream or survived the test of time. According to Arendt, "The revolutionary spirit [is] not merely the spirit of *beginning something new* but of *starting something permanent and enduring*" (1965, p. 232, emphasis mine). Why has it been so difficult for new ideas in education to gain traction? What gets in the way?

Later experiences working at schools in Maryland and Costa Rica added new items to my mental list of "What a school should be and do." Then, a school opened that, by my criteria, seemed to have the right philosophy. I was intrigued. Why had the founder started this school, and would it be able to maintain its unique philosophy as it grew? The school's first year was not without its bumps and bruises, but the founder soldiered on, determined to build a school that implemented relevant educational research and answered many of the criticisms he had of existing schools. Is it this search for an "ideal" school that propels people to start their own schools?

A Parent's Perspective

Our knowledge of the world instructs us first of all that the world is greater than our knowledge of it. (Barry, in Jardine et al., 2006, p. 101)

When I became a parent, I watched very carefully as my children interacted with their schools. Every negative experience they had was added to my list of “What schools should not be and do.” Even the well-respected Montessori school I sent them to had its flaws, as is evidenced by my son’s unwillingness to attend one day:

“Kazz, it’s only one more day. All you’ll do tomorrow is deliver these gifts to your teachers, make cookies, wish your friends a happy holiday, and gather up your snow pants and boots to bring home for winter break. You *really* need to go to school tomorrow.”
“I’m not going.”

And so ended my pleading the day before he dropped out of third grade.

I have watched with both joy and trepidation for the past 17 years as my children have been educated by “the system” as Kazz began to refer to it that year. He was at the type of Montessori school I had dreamed he would attend. He had started there at the age of three. Third grade was his fifth year and most of the preceding four years had been everything I had hoped they would be for him. He was happy, thriving, and learning in leaps and bounds. Now, suddenly and inexplicably, he was unraveling. He had become bored, then angry when no one would take his complaints seriously. He started refusing to go to school and finally dropped out altogether. He begged me to homeschool him or leave him “at home with a pile of books in the corner” so he could teach himself. “Just don't send me back,” he begged. He was 8.

When *teachers* find themselves without the power to change the things in their school environment, they declare the situation intolerable, gather their personal

belongings, and leave. Most adults would deem this a fitting response for a mature person to have in an untenable situation (Jardine et al., 2008). But when a third grader leaves school without even gathering his belongings, society labels him a dropout and declares him a failure.

I tried to uncover the source of Kazz's angst. Was it the school? The teacher? His expectations? Kazz himself? How could I make sure he got a good education? Where could he go? I began to wonder if I was overly enamored with the Montessori school I had visited in 7th grade. I began to doubt that there is an ideal way to do this thing we call education. Is it too much to expect to have it all - a positive school culture, effective pedagogy, great teachers? Had we just been lucky for the first four years? Was I being naive?

We consulted Kazz's teacher from the previous two years. She had only one piece of advice for us: "The last place I would put Kazz is into a regular public school classroom. He is too bright and creative." I found the insinuation that bright and creative kids would not do well in the average public school classroom interesting. (She turned out to be right, at least in this case.) Unfortunately, we had no other option, so we enrolled Kazz in the third grade at our local public school. During his one and only semester there, I interviewed him for a doctoral level class I was taking. I wondered if he could articulate any differences between his former school and the local public school he was attending. Here is what he said:

Me: What is school for?

Kazz: *To teach kids how to stand being yelled at.*

Me: How about when you were at your other school?

Kazz: *At [that school], I thought school was for a good education, preparing us for good, strong colleges.*

Me: How do children learn?

Kazz: By being forced into a classroom where they explain everything to us and then make us do it over and over and over again until we definitely have it in our heads.

Me: What would you have said if you were back at your old school?

Kazz: At [my old school], we got to wander around the classroom and pick out what we wanted to learn about and we got lessons that we always liked. Some were optional and some were mandatory. I liked all of the lessons and I liked the options.

After a short "honeymoon period," Kazz became desperately unhappy at our local public school, even more unhappy than he had been at the Montessori school he left. He found the homework assignments to be mind-numbing, boring, rigid and a waste of time and refused to do any of them. He said his classmates were immature and disrespectful to the teachers, and that the teachers were always yelling at the students. I was afraid he would drop out of school again.

Silberman's indictment of schools in 1970 seems sadly relevant today:

I am indignant at the failure of the public schools themselves. It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms without being appalled by the mutilation visible everywhere - mutilations of spontaneity, of the joy of learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self. The public schools, those "killers of the dream," to appropriate a phrase of Lillian Smith's - are the kind of institution one cannot really dislike until one gets to know them. (Silberman, in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 188)

While Kazz clearly preferred the Montessori school, both schools had been imperfect for him in different ways. He claimed he was bored at the Montessori school. At the public school, he felt imprisoned. He was being "forced into a classroom" where, instead of moving around and choosing his work, his freedom, his options, and his sense of agency

were gone. Now, he was complaining about being yelled at and having the academic content beaten into him over and over, bit by bit.

Where are all the Engaging Schools?

Partly, Kazz was suffering from what Jardine et al., write about at length - the tendency educators have to break up learning into little bits of knowledge and then present each bit independently and repeatedly to children. Jardine et al., call this "recycling." We often "turn the topics of education into lifeless, fragmented, indifferent objects [and] we abandon most of the learning that our children undergo to a degraded, ecologically and spiritually unsound view of the life of the world" (2006, p. 144). Jardine et al., suggest that, by contrast, the world should be embraced as an *abundance* of things for us to learn about and explore. They question why we would ever limit the topics children are allowed to pursue, or why we would parcel out knowledge carefully as if it were a scarce commodity. Is there really not enough knowledge to go around? And is school really the only place to find it? Given the vast richness of life and the explosion of new information and discoveries, why would we want to limit what we share with the next generation? And who gets to choose which content to share when we can't possibly teach *everything*?

Kazz was bored again. He could not stand to do repetitive exercises every day, especially the ones requiring him to use the same 25 spelling words in different ways when he already knew how to spell them. Likewise, he did not see the point of doing 30 nearly identical math problems when he knew how to do them after problem number five. Jardine suggests that the way schools educate children has serious consequences.

He goes so far as to suggest that a “lifeless,” disjointed, curriculum can be “a matter of life and death”:

For me, it is quite literally a matter of life and death, of liveliness and deadliness, not only for myself but for the teachers and students I often witness laboring under the terrible burden of the belief in a world that doesn't fit together and that must therefore be doled out in well-monitored, well-managed, well-controlled packages, one lifeless fragment, one lifeless worksheet, one lifeless objective at a time. (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 100)

As I continued to add new school and teacher shortcomings to my rapidly expanding list, my confidence in our schools dropped precipitously. I had seen too many flawed educational environments where children were sacrificed over the altar of tradition with the justification that “we [adults] turned out okay.” Olson writes:

I wasn't at all sure I could rely on [my children's] educational environments to take care of them - in fact, I had abundant evidence that although they were White, middle-class children with two parents at home and as yet no "identified" learning differences, they were at risk in a system that had at its center a frequently very off-putting notion of what "good" learning looked like and what "being a good student" meant. Perhaps most important to me, I wanted to nurture in them the thrill of wayward, passionate learning - the kind of learning that had, throughout my own life, given me the greatest joy. I didn't want that to be snuffed out under a mountain of five-paragraph essays, multiple-choice tests, and the dutiful outlining of endless chapters in a textbook. (2009, pp. 2-3)

I was not seeing an appropriate school in my area for Kazz, and I was not in a position to homeschool him. I also was not in a position to start my own school. I was, however, working for a philanthropy that makes grants to science education initiatives nationwide, and I began studying for a Ph.D. in education. I thought if I knew more about what starting a school entails, maybe I could start one myself.

Just when I thought Kazz would drop out of school for the second time in a year, he was admitted to a magnet program for the “Highly Gifted” for 4th and 5th grades and later to a magnet middle school Humanities program. I felt hopeful. Maybe these "specialized" programs would be more innovative and joyful.

It occurred to me that schooling is in some ways a *relative* experience in which one situation or year or teacher is deemed better or worse than the next. Context matters. While one person might consider a school to be outstanding, another may see the same school as suboptimal. My goal as a parent was to move my children to progressively better situations, or at least to *less damaging* ones. Was finding a dream school realistic, or is it impossible for there to be a school that works for *every* child *every* day?

The “highly gifted” elementary and middle school programs Kazz attended for the next five years had many positive qualities - some gifted teachers, challenging curricula, and kids who were as curious, creative, and quirky as Kazz. But, along with these positive qualities came life-threatening bullying, extreme academic pressure, high social stress, and a lack of warmth and joy in certain classes.

Where are all the Peaceful Schools?

The bullying was the worst part and it was unrelenting. Kazz was kicked, called names, yelled at, spat on, tripped, insulted (“You are ugly and stupid and have no friends”), pinched, hit, had his hair pulled, and had his belongings thrown out of the bus window. He watched his friends fall into puddles of tears as older kids ripped snacks out of their hands, hit them with notebooks, shoved their faces into the water fountain, and injured them by stuffing them into their lockers and closing the door.

School no longer seemed a safe place for anyone. Kazz could barely concentrate on his classes some days. He and some of his classmates were slowly being destroyed. He complained to me sadly, "No one will stop it." Several of his friends transferred to other schools, but Kazz wanted to stay. He liked some of his classmates and teachers very much. He liked what he called the "level of the work" and, based on what he was hearing from friends, he did not consider his regular public school to be a safer option.

Certainly, violence among children is not entirely the fault of the schools, and every school official with whom I have spoken claims to be doing his or her best to prevent bullying in their building. Every school wants to be a positive, cheerful, productive place. Nonetheless, as Jardine et al., point out, the structure of the school curriculum is actually part of the problem: "Waiting on knowledge as a way of monitoring, controlling, and doling out this abundance leads to more than a sense of defeat and bewilderment. It leads...to exhaustion, paranoia and, I suggest, eventually violence" (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 101).

By 7th grade, Kazz had a number of friends who were coming out as gay or lesbian. He also had friends who had gay or lesbian parents. In a show of support for them, he created a shirt that said, "Gays, Lesbians, Transgenders, Heterosexuals, Bisexuals - All are Cool with Me." He was thrown out of the cafeteria by the food service workers and treated so badly by several administrators that I received phone calls from other parents whose children reported being appalled by the way in which Kazz had been treated by the school. One father, an attorney, asked if we wanted to press charges against the school.

A couple of Kazz's friends supported him the next day by wearing shirts that said, "First the Jews, then the Blacks, now the Gays. Who's next?" and "Civil Rights for All." The events were picked up by the wire and spread through national press outlets both online and in print. Meanwhile, little changed at the school. Several days later, a teacher would not allow Kazz to enter her classroom wearing a shirt with a peace sign, a rainbow, and a pink triangle on it. No one stepped in when kids assumed Kazz was gay and taunted him, shouting in his face that he would burn in Hell, and telling him God didn't make "Adam and Adam."

I was as patient as I could be, but the bullying, now coming from teachers, administrators, and students alike did not stop. We did not know what to do. Every alternative seemed flawed in some significant and unacceptable way. I had been murmuring about starting my own school for awhile by then, and Kazz asked me if I could please start a school immediately. If I were principal of his school, he reasoned, everyone would have to be nice to him. I suspected that starting a school would take a tremendous amount of time and knowledge, not to mention significant personal and financial commitment and sacrifice. I had none of those resources at the time.

When Kazz became so despondent that he landed in the hospital for 11 days, I decided school had become life threatening for him. Is this what school is supposed to be? Is it acceptable for school officials to say they are doing all they can when children are being destroyed in their building? How can a child learn under circumstances like these? Was Kazz learning important life lessons from all this? And were these lessons I wanted him to learn?

Kazz was learning to be conformist and compliant. He was learning that it is dangerous to think for himself or to stand up for those who are marginalized by traditional societal norms. He was learning that it is acceptable for children and adults to bully each other at school. How are we to raise kind, peaceful children in schools that tolerate this type of behavior? Could another school have handled these events differently with more positive outcomes and lessons for all concerned?

Jardine et al., say we must attend to not only "some objective properties of classroom events, but [also] *how classroom events are treated*" (2008, p. 44). Where are all the schools that pay close attention to *how classroom events are treated*? Where were the schools with a friendly, peaceful, cooperative culture where students would never dream of bullying one another? Aoki says, "[We] need to design more humane educational environments" (in Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 93). I was really unhappy with the lack of humanity I was seeing at Kazz's school.

Where are the Schools in which a Child Can Be Well?

Olson writes, "Like all parents, I wanted my children to do well in school, but I also wanted them to *be well* (her emphasis), emotionally and spiritually, in school" (2009, p. 2). I could no longer justify sending Kazz to school if he was not going to be well and was going to have to endure intellectual, physical and emotional abuse. For Kazz, school was often an inhumane, irrelevant and/or hostile environment. Academically, his classes were being taught at a high level, and he loved the intellectual challenge, but he was suffering emotionally and spiritually.

In the middle of his 7th grade year, I took a five-month sabbatical from work, packed us up, and moved to Costa Rica, where Kazz attended a bilingual private school

in the rainforest. I undertook an internship as a teacher and administrator at the same school. From the description of the school, it looked like a school of dreams. The school served children from Pre-K to 11th grade (there is no 12th grade in Costa Rica) and was tucked into the rainforest on top of a beautiful mountain amidst a culture that adored its children. It seemed to value simplicity, joy, beauty and care above all else.

The founders of the school had been experimenting with engaging and relevant educational methods since the school's inception 20 years prior. I was eager to see if the school was as wholesome and effective as its website purported and, if so, I wanted to learn how the founders first became motivated to start the school and how they made it into what it was.

There was little to no bullying at this school. The children were kind, warm and welcoming, and the teachers were happy and nurturing despite their meager resources, very low pay (\$500/month), and difficult working and living conditions. After so many years of being bullied, it took Kazz a couple of weeks to let down his guard and trust that no one was going to hurt him. Months later, he did not want to leave, and even lobbied successfully to return for two of the next four summers.

Our experience at this school in Costa Rica renewed my faith in education, reminded me that it is possible to build a school that serves most of its children well both academically and emotionally. Being there also reminded me how deeply their school experience affects children. Culture and content really do matter. By then, I had resigned myself to the idea that all schools have strengths and weaknesses. I had learned that no single pedagogical method or school structure works for everyone every day. I had learned that what happens outside the classroom is every bit as important as what

happens inside it. I had learned that parents need to advocate for their children. I had learned that children can be quite perceptive about their education. I had learned that children will drop out of school if they feel they are not getting a good education or if school is harming them. And I had learned that schools could be violent and damaging places. Was it time for me to use all of this information to build a school of dreams?

Building a School of Dreams

I couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to gather up everything I had learned by then to design a school that would serve *as many children as well as possible*. What would such a school look like? Who would teach there and how? Was it possible to implement all the positive practices I had seen and avoid those less desirable? To what extent?

By now, I had taught Pre-K, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades at five public, private, and parochial schools in three states and Costa Rica. I had seen enough different educational practices and read enough education studies as a student, teacher, and parent to motivate me to consider pursuing an administrative role in an educational setting. As an administrator, I thought, I would have a larger impact on a school than if I returned to the classroom. I began to work toward my Administrator I certification. At the same time, I continued to revise the design of "the perfect" school I had been sketching and modifying in my head for years. Did I have enough information and experience to imagine a school that would be joyful and effective? What else did I need to know about starting or leading a school? What did I not know?

My Experience as a Scholar and Professional

In addition to my experience as a student, teacher and parent, I have an MBA degree, an M.Ed. degree, ten years of educational consulting experience, ten years of educational program management experience, and eight years of study in a Ph.D. program in Education at the University of Maryland. My daughter has graduated from high school and my son is now a high school senior. I am still looking for schools that follow most of the recommendations made by the educational literature I have been reading in my doctoral level classes. I see very few. Am I not looking hard enough? Am I expecting schools to do and be too much to too many? Am I exaggerating the flaws I see in our schools and underemphasizing their strengths?

What the Experts Say

Nearly every day, I am presented with evidence that confirms my worst fears about education. Indeed, "a flood of reports since 1983 have criticized schools...for all manner of shortcomings" (Hagerty, 1995, p. 3). Philosophers, educators and scholars such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Maria Montessori, Sir Ken Robinson, John Bransford, Linda Darling-Hammond, Alfie Kohn, John Gatto, William Pinar and many others have confirmed my observations and experiences with "the system," and made me wonder if anything can be done to improve existing schools. Pinar, Schwab and Eisner critique the school system as follows:

- 1) The [traditional curriculum] is out-of-date and we have little or nothing to replace it with.
- 2) Our present ways of thinking and talking about schools and schooling do not do justice to the complexity and dignity of the human condition.
- 3) The control of curriculum is in the hands of technologists, test makers, textbook publishers, and school administrators.
- 4) Our schools are losing sight of humanistic values and goals.
- 5) Curriculum workers have little to offer teachers that is of direct help to them.
- 6) The

aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of the educational experience are being ignored. 7) Our schools are damaging too many students, particularly children of the poor and oppressed minorities. (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 233)

In accord with point #1 above, with respect to outdated curricula, the first paragraph of Angeline Stole Lillard's book on the Montessori method of education says:

Two fundamental cornerstones of American schooling today were placed at the turn of the 20th century: the school as a factory and the child as a blank slate. Students of child development know that these ideas are obsolete, but they continue to have a profound impact on how schooling is done. The persistence of these outmoded ideas explains why so few children really flourish in school, and why so many strongly prefer snow days to school days. Yet, for most of us, envisioning how to eliminate two such entrenched ideas is difficult...Modern research in psychology suggests the Montessori system is much more suited to how children learn and develop than the traditional system is. (2005, p. 3)

I wondered why more schools had not adopted the Montessori method or something like it if modern research shows it is "much more suited to how children learn and develop"? Montessori designed her teaching methods to educate "idiot" children living in the slums of Rome, and the method was later adopted and proved successful for "normal" and "gifted" children as well. Why are some schools unable to implement time-tested, successful methods that work for most children?

With respect to point #2 above, regarding the complexity of the human condition, in Rousseau's *Emile or On Education* (1762), he introduces the idea that teachers "concentrate on what it is important for men to know without considering what children are in a condition to learn" (1979, pp. 33-34). He goes on to say that children are complex beings who deserve to be treated with dignity within their own particular

context, and that teachers need to study their students more carefully and know them more fully in order to teach them effectively.

John Gatto speaks to point #4 about how our schools are losing sight of humanistic values and goals. A year before Gatto resigned from his teaching position, and just after being named New York State Teacher of the Year and New York City Teacher of the Year for the third year in a row, he wrote:

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my [30] years of teaching: schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders.

This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers, aides, and administrators. It must be that the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Teachers do care and do work very hard, but the institution they work for is psychopathic; it has no conscience. It rings a bell and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell where he must memorize [science facts]. (Gatto, 1990 speech, at: <http://selfmadescholar.com/b/2009/03/31/great-thinkers-on-self-education-john-taylor-gatto/>)

When I quote educators like John Gatto, I often get the same response. Either listeners defend our schools and explain why they are the way they are, or deny or dismiss what is being said. The most common responses are, "Not all schools are like this. Some schools are really good." And, "We were taught that way, and it worked for us." This last remark bothers me the most. Do we really believe that the content and manner in which we were taught 10, 20, 30 or 40 years ago will work for children entering school today? My readings and common sense suggest not - the world was very

different even just five years ago. Why would we expect a curriculum designed 20 years ago to remain relevant?

At some point, I began to acknowledge that we educators have a real challenge on our hands. We must find a way to prepare our children for a world we cannot yet imagine, but we are not even preparing them for the world of today. We need to have very different schools than the ones we have now in order to prepare children for their future and not our past.

Professor John Bransford's seminal National Academies' publication, *How People Learn* (2000), supports Gatto's contention that schools are not giving children the skills they will need as adults. In it, Bransford points out that, in the 20th century, reading, writing and calculating were indeed sufficient skills to have:

It was not the general rule for educational systems to train people to think and read critically, to express themselves clearly and persuasively, to solve complex problems in science and mathematics. Now, at the end of the century, these aspects of high literacy are required of almost everyone in order to successfully negotiate the complexities of contemporary life. (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 4)

Sir Ken Robinson agrees with Bransford that we are not educating children adequately for their future. In 1988, Sir Ken presented the results of his massive inquiry for the British government on the significance of creativity in the educational system and the economy. He was knighted in 2003 for these achievements. In his (now viral) TED talks, he blames schools for not giving children the education they will need and for a measurable decline in creativity world-wide. "We are educating people out of their creativity," Robinson says. We do not get the best out of people, he argues, "because we have been educated to become good workers, rather than creative thinkers.

Students with restless minds and bodies – far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity – are ignored or even stigmatized, with terrible consequences"

(http://www.ted.com/speakers/sir_ken_robinson.html). Ignored? Stigmatized? Terrible consequences? Sir Ken Robinson was not mincing his words. Is it acceptable for schools to ignore and stigmatize children and leave them to suffer terrible consequences? Are those the kinds of schools we want for our children and our children's children?

Where Are the Schools That Listen?

As part of my doctoral program, I read Alfie Kohn's works: *Feel-Bad Education...and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling* (2011), *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (2006), and *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason* (2005). Kohn's most notable work was a meta-analysis of the research on homework. In his book, *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, Kohn summarizes the homework literature and finds no research, logic, or experience to support the use of homework as a beneficial educational tool, except for independent reading or certain long-term projects at the high school level. Contrary to popular belief, Kohn concludes, homework does not improve learning, nor does it provide any non-academic benefits to children. In the November 4, 2007 *Washington Post Magazine*, Kohn was quoted as saying, "There is no conclusive evidence that homework increases student achievement across the board." In fact, Kohn offers considerable evidence to show that *homework actually harms children* – it robs them of their childhoods, undermines their interest in learning, denies them time for individual pursuits, and strains

family harmony. In the end, Kohn says, the research shows that homework can be correlated with only one outcome - the more homework a child is given, the more s/he hates school. And yet, nearly every school I know of still assigns homework and defends the practice unequivocally.

I was teaching when I read Kohn's work, so I took the bold step of trying a little experiment by eliminating homework from my classes. The change was as positive and dramatic as Kohn would have predicted, and motivated me to share my observations with other parents and teachers. Many thought I was crazy, and most disagreed with what I was doing. I tried to explain my rationale and what the research says, but no one wanted to believe that the homework they were assigning as teachers and that their children were doing as students might not be beneficial and in fact, might be *damaging* to them.

Changing Minds

It seems logical that schools could reinvent themselves if the people in them change them from within. But, changing minds and practices is difficult. In his work on misconceptions about science, Phil Sadler (2003) discovered that we have a tendency to cling to preconceived notions even in the face of new and compelling evidence to the contrary, especially when new knowledge seems counter-intuitive (Sadler, 2003). As Sadler showed, and as I was experiencing as a doctoral student, it is extremely difficult to change the misconceptions people have about education.

Taken together, everything I have learned in my doctoral program has helped me to form a comprehensive, consistent picture in my mind of the status of the educational enterprise today and the serious challenges it faces. I now have a more informed

understanding of the American educational system, and I do not like what I know.

Moving forward, I decided I could do one of two things – I could try to change existing schools from within, or I could start a new school.

Why Not Change Existing Schools?

One semester, I registered for a class on school reform. I was tired of hearing about everything that was wrong with our schools. It was time to learn how to change them for the better. I was eager to learn what I could do to help schools be less damaging and more beneficial to children. How could schools become places in which more children could flourish every day everywhere?

To my surprise, the takeaway message from my semester studying school reform - from the readings, the professor, guest speakers, and my classmates - suggested that it is impossible to significantly change existing schools. Hagerty's (1995) observations are typical:

I have witnessed numerous attempts at planned educational change over the last 35 years. The benefits have rarely equaled the costs, and all too often the situation has seemed to worsen. (p. vii)

Traditional and cultural change occurs slowly and with considerable pain in any society and its schools. (p. 15)

Apparently, unseen cultural forces, like sinister ghosts, permeate the walls and haunt our educational institutions forever, rendering their practices "stubbornly, intractably resistant to change" (Olson, 2009, p. 3). "We are terribly attached to an institution that does not, in the face of a great deal of evidence, serve us well" (Ibid., p. 60). Yet, Deborah Meier writes, "It's easier to design a new school culture than to

change an existing one. And it's [always] the whole school culture, not [one part that needs fixing]" (Meier, 1997, p. 9).

The Chairs on the Titanic

"Is our educational system really that broken and hopeless?" I thought. And was there really no other way to "fix" the problem but to get rid of everyone and everything and start over from scratch? That seemed excessive to me, not to mention impractical. In 1998, Charles Myers and Douglas Simpson wrote:

We believe that most current reform, restructuring and partnership endeavors do not improve student learning and teaching as much and as quickly as needed; we say this after many years of working in and studying these endeavors. (1998, p. vii)

"Trying to reform existing schools is like moving chairs around on the Titanic," warned Dr. Jacqueline Jordan-Irvine, a visiting lecturer from Emory University speaking at the University of Maryland on February 23, 2006. It had been awhile since I had considered starting my own school, and I remember how sad I felt when I heard those words. I did not want to feel helpless and impotent, so I tried to convince myself that change from within *must* be possible. Then, a report by the Gates Foundation called "National Evaluation of High School Transformation" crossed my desk (National Evaluation of High School Transformation: Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants. American Institutes for Research and SRI International, <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Education/ResearchAndEvaluation/Evaluation/HSEvaluation.htm/>, November 2005). As its name suggests, the report was a long-term review of the Gates Foundation's attempts to reform poorly performing urban

schools, and it confirmed what Dr. Jordan-Irvine had said. Trying to reform existing schools is like moving chairs around on the Titanic. Now I was really discouraged.

Old Wine in New Bottles

Typically, [reform] efforts concentrate on what is presently wrong with schools and try to fix the many parts, piece by piece. They devote much energy to changing people – primarily teachers – structures, and bureaucracies without affecting student learning in noticeable ways. (Myers & Simpson, 1998, p. vii)

While Myers and Simpson lament the lack of progress they see as schools try to “fix the many parts, piece by piece,” Jardine et al., write about schools dragging around long, heavy shackles while well-meaning adults pick at them one link at a time. They write, “Public schools have remained intractable to significant reform” (2002, p. 92), and “Schools have a long history of pouring old wine into new bottles” (p. 94). Levin adds, “Valued practices, theories, and beliefs will endure even if an outmoded model dissolves” (Levin, 1998, p. 65). A report by the Carnegie Institution adds:

There is a growing awareness that further progress is unlikely without fundamental changes in structure. In fact, we suspect that dramatic change may be easier to achieve than incremental change, given the growing frustration, political gridlock and the increasing awareness that the biggest impediment to progress is the nature of the system itself. (“A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century,” *Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy*, 1986, p. 16)

I began to think that if I continued to ignore or deny these messages, I would run naively into an educational career only to fail. Or, I would try to change ineffective practices and end up spinning my wheels, failing to progress, spinning my wheels some more, and ultimately giving up when it was clear my efforts were in vain. I could already

hear the echoes of my professors, the reports, and my own experience: "We told you our schools needed more than just a little tweaking around the edges. Why didn't you listen?"

I was listening now. I was hearing everyone loudly and clearly. Our schools are at a minimum not serving all children well, I was hearing. At worst, they are destroying them in myriad ways. Worst of all, it is nearly impossible to change them from within, hard as we might try. The evidence continued to mount to support the idea that the only successful school reform strategy is to start a radically new and different school, a school unlike any of the schools currently dotting the landscape. Olson writes, "Emerging views of the nature of knowledge require new understandings of learning, instruction, and the student's relationship to the teacher - essentially new schools" (2009, p. 61). Wilson adds, "We found in New York City that it was much more productive to replace large, failed schools with new, small schools" (2011, p. 50). During that time, a man who was about to start his own school said to me, "because [change] can't be done from within...it became clear to me that I had to [start my own school] at some point." It seemed clearer and clearer to me that the only way to make things better in education was to start over from scratch. I began to explore this idea.

I again considered designing my own school. By now, I had observed hundreds of classrooms in dozens of schools at all levels from Pre-K through graduate school from a variety of perspectives - teacher, student, administrator, consultant, parent, volunteer, and philanthropic educational professional. Mine would be a school that addressed the weaknesses I saw in the education system and would incorporate what the educational research recommended.

Imagining a School of Dreams

Myers and Simpson write, “We suggest that reformers look ahead to what schools, learning, and teaching *could and should be* rather than at what is not working” (emphasis mine) (1998, p. ix). They go on to say that teachers should formulate a clear vision of what their school would look like under ideal conditions and move toward that image “expeditiously” and “persistently.” This seemed like a productive and positive philosophy and path to take.

And so, I designed two schools. The first was a middle school I sketched out as a deliverable for a class on school leadership. I called the design, “Middle School with Joy.” The second was a preK-12 science-focused school. I pitched the science-focused school to my employer, a philanthropy. The proposal generated a lot of excitement for a while, but in the end, the timing was not right and they would not let me implement the design. And so, my first attempt to start a school failed in the earliest stages of the effort.

I could have given up, but I did not want to be accused of moving chairs around on the Titanic or pouring old wine into new bottles. I knew people were starting new schools, primarily charter schools and private schools. One of my friends had started boarding charter schools in several cities, and some of my children’s friends were attending newly opened private schools. Yet, all I could do was design hypothetical schools. How could I start a school? What did I know about starting a school? What would such an undertaking be like? I needed to know more. Certainly there were people out there starting schools. What could I learn from them?

These and other questions continued to bubble up in my mind and nag at me: Have I considered all the valid reasons why schools might behave as they do? Maybe it’s

true that existing schools are the way they are for good reason. How are we supposed to prepare today's children for tomorrow's world when we have no idea what tomorrow's world will look like and when so many of the jobs they will have do not exist today? Even if schools are damaging children and not giving them what they will need to live productive and fulfilling lives in an increasingly complex world, how do we change things for the better? How do we create the type of school Myers and Simpson describe as ideal: “morally based communities of learners” where learning is “experience-based intellectual construction” (1998, p. viii). Or that The American Montessori Association describes in this way: “In a good school there will be...happy, kind children, busy on self-chosen, uninterrupted work” (<http://www.montessori.edu/refs.html>). What is it like to envision, design, and open a great school?

I became interested in **the lived experience of starting a school**. What is it like to reach the point at which a person takes a leap of faith and creates a school that is vastly different from the institutions dotting the educational landscape at the time? I was interested in the experience of these people as change agents in education. In what way are they Pioneers? Renegades? Educational *transformers* pouring *new* wine into *new* bottles? Specifically, I was interested in *their experience as they developed and implemented their vision for a new school*.

The Last Straw

I hope it is obvious by now what brought me to this point. I had decided that the current educational system was inveterately flawed and so resistant to change that I could not work with or within it anymore. Was my journey to this point the same journey as

the school founders' experience? When I found myself ready to take a "leap of faith," to consider starting a school, I wrote the following poem:

Jumping off a Cliff

I imagine myself part of a flock of sheep grazing blissfully on a plain.

I am the sheep that suspects there is something wrong with the grass we are eating.

It is getting browner and does not taste as fresh as it did before.

My fear is heightened after my lambs are born and I see them getting sick after eating the brown grass.

Older, wiser sheep who no longer graze there confirm what I am experiencing.

I start to move away from the flock to graze in greener pastures farther and farther afield.

There are other sheep out there with us, but not many.

At some point, my lambs and I have eaten our way to the edge of a cliff. We could simply turn around and return to grazing with the flock but what I have experienced there and what the elders have taught me make it clear that would be a poor choice.

But we still need to eat.

While the cliff is high, the grass at the bottom looks lush and green and I think we will survive if we plan our jump carefully.

My peers in the flock think I am crazy.

"Come back," they say, "the grass over here is fine.

It nourished us when we were lambs, and look how well we have grown!"

We second-guess ourselves and return obediently to the flock for a time. Soon, we become sick again.

The sheep around us are less healthy, too, but they don't seem to notice since the change has been gradual.

We find ourselves again at the edge of the cliff.

The flock hollers after us, "What are you doing over there?

Are you too good for our grass?

It is not any better out there, you know!"

But, we have returned to the cliff and this time there can be no turning back.

The grass at the bottom of the cliff looks so much better.

After weighing the options one last time we take a leap of faith.

(Debra Felix, 3/16/11, revised on 4/29/12)

I found myself nodding after my professor said, "I think public schools destroy children." For me, her statement was refreshing and honest. I felt relieved that, this time, *someone else* was delivering the unattractive news that I was thinking. Still, my immediate response was to brace for an attack. I was sure my classmates would reject the professor's claim as preposterous and sensationalistic and would not only challenge her, but by association, me. I was not in the mood to be challenged. So, I nodded that day, but I did not say anything. How could I sit there and not say anything? This was indeed the last straw for me.

I have described above some of my experiences as a student, teacher, parent, scholar, and professional. These experiences have informed my pre-understandings of education and motivated me to turn to the phenomenon of **the lived experience of starting a school**. I have described how my journey has taken me from a place of acceptance and compliance to a place of serious questioning and doubt. I became disenchanted with school as a student. I ignored the curriculum as a teacher. I removed my son from one of the most highly regarded programs in one of the most highly regarded school systems in the country because it was damaging him. I have observed countless examples of flawed educational practices and read dozens of books and articles that support the near universality of these flaws. But, along with the negatives, I have seen strong positive examples of ways in which to improve a student's chances of success in school and life. It is these and other positive practices that I wish to implement and disseminate more broadly during the remainder of my career.

My orientation to the lifeworld is that of a student, teacher, parent, scholar, and professional whose experience and education have melded into a desire to change the

landscape of education for future students. It is from this desire and these perspectives that I turn to my study **of the lived experience of starting a school** using a phenomenological hermeneutic mode of inquiry. By undertaking this task, I seek to have a fuller understanding of the way others construct meaning around starting schools and the impact the experience has on their lives and on the education enterprise.

Exploring an Experience: Van Manen's Methodological Guidelines

In his book, *Researching Lived Experience*, van Manen (2007) suggests that phenomenology is a particularly fitting method for researching the kind of deeply contextualized experience I am exploring. Phenomenology places an appropriate emphasis on having a holistic focus on the human lifeworld. He says:

All phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of the human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations. Our lived experiences and the structures of meanings (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted, constitute the immense complexity of the lifeworld. (p. 101)

Van Manen lays out a method for exploring a lived experience as it is actually experienced in an everyday situation, rather than in a situation specifically designed for the purpose of being analyzed or scrutinized. He advises phenomenologists to allow for the “immense complexity” of the lifeworld in such a study, in that each person’s experience inevitably exists within a broader, more complex world and is therefore affected *by* the lifeworld, while simultaneously rendering its own effects *on* it. Van Manen calls this inseparable connectedness of the human being to the world “intentionality.” He warns that an analysis that fails to take into account this

intentionality and the complex context surrounding the phenomenon is ultimately likely to yield a more narrow understanding of the experience under study.

While I provide more detail on this methodology in chapter 3, I gravitated to the use of phenomenology for this study because I could not find a better way to uncover the insights locked within what is otherwise an indescribable experience. Starting a school is an intensely personal experience that nevertheless affects every interaction the school founder has within his own world. Van Manen (2007) contends that phenomenology allows us to describe and interpret such an experience in a very personal and finite way, and at the same time, see the experience more naturally and more broadly.

I began this study with an intense interest in coming to an understanding of the **experience of starting a school**. I particularly hoped to realize insights that transcended my own experience and those of the study's participants. To do so, I turned to the guiding work of van Manen (2007), who suggests six research activities within hermeneutic phenomenology that, when followed, render a phenomenon in its fullness to the researcher. He suggests the following research process:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
 2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
 3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
 4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
 5. Maintaining a strong and orientated pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
 6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.
- (pp. 30-31)

From these activities and the text they generate, it was my intention to render the phenomenon of starting a school with a degree of clarity that would suggest insight into the effects of the experience on the individual school founder and on the education field. These methodological activities are discussed further in chapter 3, which explores more fully the philosophy of phenomenology and the grounding for this research.

What exactly is this phenomenon - **the lived experience of starting a school**? Of what does it consist? What boundaries can I set to help define the phenomenon? This is the focus of the next chapter, in which I clarify various terms used to define the phenomenon, such as “founder,” “start,” and “school,” and some of the deeper meanings of these terms in relation to the phenomenon. The roles of imagination, change, and action are introduced as basic features of the phenomenon, and I draw on the literature to support my rendering of them.

Chapter 3 introduces the philosophical groundings and research methodology of the study. It includes sections on human science research, the idea of a phenomenological essence, hermeneutics and interpretation, the four lived essentials of meaning, and more on how van Manen’s six guidelines are woven into the methodology. The latter part of chapter 3 outlines the methodology at the level of participant selection, the generation of text (data), and what will be done with the text.

Chapter 4 presents a deeper rendering of the phenomenon of starting a school as described by the lived experience of the participants in the study. This chapter identifies themes that arose from the text generated by participants, themes that show themselves as essential to the experience, and then relates them to the philosophy and poetry of our daily lives. The final chapter, Chapter 5, seeks to engage a larger discussion around

insights arising from the study and the tensions surrounding them as we think of ways to improve the field of education. Chapter 5 answers the question, “What does the establishment of new schools suggest for pedagogical practice and policy, and what are the implications for future activity in this area of endeavor?”

CHAPTER 2:

STARTING SOMETHING: UNPACKING THE PHENOMENON

What exactly is this phenomenon - the starting of a school? The first section of this chapter opens up the basic elements of the phenomenon: the school founder and the elements of surprise, risk, and creation that, by definition, comprise the starting of something new. This is followed by a discussion of different kinds of schools - a new school, a charter school, a private school, alternatives to school such as homeschooling and unschooling - and a look at the experience of putting thoughts into action.

There is a limit to how much one can cover in a single phenomenological study, and this study is no exception. I have elected to limit the scope of the study to include only the experience of starting a *private or charter school* and only *through the end of the first year* after the school opens. While there might be wisdom to be gained by studying the experience of starting a school that is *not* a private or charter school (such as an online school or homeschool), and there might be much to learn by examining what happens in the years *after* the first year of operation, these limits capture the most important part of the experience for school founders⁴, and make the study focused and manageable.

Open Versus Start

The original title of this study was “Building a School of Dreams: Uncovering the Lived Experience of *Opening* a School.” As the research continued, however, the term “to start” a school began to crop up more and more frequently. What is the difference, and which phenomenon does the study explore?

⁴ From here on, “school founders” refers to the particular school founders in the study, except where noted otherwise.”

Opening a School

The word *open* comes from the Old English meaning "not closed down, raised up" which comes from the Proto-Germanic *upana*, meaning "put up or set up" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). Indeed, school founders set up schools, idea by idea, person by person and in some cases, brick by brick. In the Germanic languages, the word *open* is related to *up*. Indeed, the goal of a school founder is not only to "put up" walls, but also to "raise up" children.

In many Indo-European languages, the word "open" arose as an opposite to the word for "closed" or "shut." Certainly, schools are often founded in opposition to what exists or to what students, teachers, and parents expect a school to be. School founders may open a school because they are unwilling to accept the closed set of educational options available at the time and place in which they find themselves. Their minds are open to the possibilities that lurk beyond the schools they see. They look to open new doors for others to enter and new places in which children can learn. They are open to, and are opening, new ways of thinking and learning and seeing the world. They endeavor to open the eyes of the children who will attend their school, and they are looking to open young minds.

From 1712, the act of *opening* took on the meaning of "action of beginning (something)" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). The act of beginning something also is a key feature of opening a school. The school founder, at some point, moves beyond the thinking and

planning stages and actually launches the activity that ultimately leads to the opening of a new school.

In many ways, then, school founders do open schools. However, I am focused on the school founder's experience of *starting* a school, since the word "start" captures the essence of the phenomenon more accurately. The next section presents and describes this distinction and opens up some of the elements that define the *starting* of a school.

Starting a School: Surprise, Risk, and Creation

I said you wanna be startin' somethin'
You got to be startin' somethin'
I said you wanna be startin' somethin'
You got to be startin' somethin'
(From the song, "Wanna be Starting Something" by
Michael Jackson, 1983)

What does it mean to *start* something? The origins of the word *start* suggest that starting something involves elements of two seemingly disconnected ideas: *surprise* (as in "startle") and *risk of failure* (as in falling or tumbling). Another meaning of *start* is to *create something* or *bring something into being*, as in starting a business or a school (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). Starting a school, then, embodies these elements of *surprise, risk, and creation*.

Surprise

Surprise! The first meaning of the word "start" is surprise, as in the word "startle." According to Arendt, an element of *surprise* or startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and all origins:

It is of the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and all origins. (1958, pp. 177-178)

“[Arendt’s] words hark back to what Stevens calls surprise and Dewey a venture into the unknown” (Greene, 1995, p. 21). What makes something startling or unexpected?

According to Cast (1994), a surprise begins with the understanding that we live and act according to a generally accepted set of rules. When something deviates from this set of rules, when there is a divide between the reality we have come to expect and what actually occurs, the outcome is surprise. In short, surprise represents the difference between expectations and reality, the gap between our assumptions and the way things in fact turn out. A surprise is the result of a prediction that fails. Starting a school, then, involves creating something unexpected. Suddenly, a new and different school exists where there wasn't one before. The new school itself *and* the experience of starting it are surprising in their own ways.

As I have never started a school myself, I conducted some opening conversations with school founders to gain preliminary access to the experience of doing so. School founder Todd identified surprises at multiple levels of the process of opening his school. His goal was not to duplicate an existing school or to model his school after an existing school. Instead, Todd’s school opened in stark contrast to existing schools, in reaction to those schools Todd deemed lacking for himself as an educator and for his children as students. “The surprise comes along with becoming different,” writes Greene (1995, p. 20).

The first surprise to Todd was the realization that those around him were very surprised by his willingness to abandon a prestigious and lucrative law career to become an educator and later to start a school. Todd also faced unexpected surprises in the process of opening his school, and found himself running from one startling and

unexpected situation to another during the school's first year of operation. One surprise was the first set of teachers Todd hired:

It was just so unpredictable, and that confused me. [Issues with the faculty] has been the biggest surprise. My first hires were a really interesting mix of people [whose backgrounds] you'd look at and say, WOW! [Laughs] And BOOM! The kids arrive and school starts, and YUK, they start becoming like every other school faculty. Unbelievable. And that, I couldn't predict.

The teachers Todd hired knew he had a surprisingly different philosophy about teaching and learning, and their resumes and interviews indicated they were on board with it. But, when his school actually opened, they reverted to familiar ways of teaching, using methods they had experienced as students or that they had used as teachers at previous schools. Todd was surprised by the disconnect between what teachers said they would do in his school and what they actually did. What place does the element of surprise occupy in the starting of a school? In how many ways does it manifest itself? What does surprise mean for the school founder, teachers and students at a newly opened school?

Risk

Risk is what life is all about.
(Steeves, 2006, p. 191)

The second meaning of the word "start" involves risk or a risk of failure. Indeed, from preliminary discussions with school founders, it is clear that starting a school involves tremendous *risk*. There is risk to the school founder, who may indeed *founder* (meaning wallow, sink, plunge, or fail) in the process of starting a school. The founder often assumes personal, professional and financial risk in order to start a school.

The Oxford English Dictionary cites the earliest use of the word "risque" in English as from 1621. It defines risk as the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). That is, risk is the potential that an action we take, or our inaction, will lead to an undesirable outcome. No matter what we do (if we do something or even if we do nothing at all) there is a risk. However, the notion of risk implies that we have a choice about what we do and that some choices are riskier than others. How does a school founder weigh the many risks of starting a school in order to make decisions? How does the element of risk play out in the school founder's experience of starting a school? At what point is doing nothing not an option anymore?

None of the school founders with whom I spoke had ever started a school before. They started their schools from nothing, from scratch. They began with an idea, some experience as teachers or parents, and a clear philosophy and plan. "Every new school faces a unique subset of challenges" (McConaghy, 2006, p. 6), and school founders, therefore, assume the accompanying risks and possibility of failure brought about by those unique challenges.

School founder Joe left his job and newly renovated home and moved 400 miles to start a school. He and his wife were deeply concerned about all they were leaving behind and about their now uncertain financial future. With far more questions than answers, Joe began his school founding adventure with a fair amount of trepidation and an acknowledgement of the risks he faced:

When you start something, you are in uncharted waters. That's high risk...And so, I put my ducks in order so that when I dove into the pool, I knew I wouldn't smash my head on the bottom. And then I started swimming. And

while I was swimming, I was in pretty clear water, but every once in awhile I hit something and I knew those were coming. I *knew* there were logs in the water and that things were going to happen. I felt I needed to be aware of the risks before I started. That helped me to avoid having the risks turn into pitfalls.

Like giving birth to one's first child, school founders have little idea what to expect as they embark on their journey to open a school. There are surprises and risks and surprise risks. And like giving birth, the experience for each school founder is different. There is no documented way in which to prepare for the unexpected challenges inevitable in this type of undertaking. The intrinsic risks associated with starting something from scratch, and the unpredictable twists, turns, and surprises of the journey make starting a school an extraordinarily difficult journey for which to prepare.

“Starting from scratch” is an expression commonly used to mean “start again from the beginning,” where an initial attempt has failed and a new attempt is made with nothing of value carried forward from the first attempt. In the late 1800s, when “start from scratch” first began to be used it simply meant “start with no advantage” or “to be made from basic ingredients.” Since the 18th century, the word “scratch” has been used as a sporting term for a boundary or starting point scratched in the ground. The first “scratch” came from the world of boxing, while a later “scratch” was the crease used as a boundary line for batsmen in cricket:

John Nyren's *Young Cricketer's Tutor*, 1833 records this line from a 1778 work by Cotton: “Ye strikers... Stand firm to your scratch, let your bat be upright.” The concept of “starting from scratch” comes from the world of boxing. The scratched line there specified the positions of boxers who faced each other at the beginning of a bout. Scratch later came to be used as the name of any starting point for a race. (<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/start-from-scratch.html>)

In a running race, where everyone starts from a single “scratch” or line, no one has an advantage. Starting from scratch therefore means to begin from the beginning, to embark on a new race of sorts, to start something without any advantage. The sacrifices, the newness, the uncertainty, a lack of preparation and advantages, and the surprises-in-waiting all contribute to the riskiness of the venture.

Why do school founders decide to accept these risks and take such a big leap? What authorizes them to start their own schools? What makes them think they can create schools that are better than those designed and refined by professionals over many decades? And who assumes the risk? The school founder alone? The first group of teachers? Students? Families?

Joe explains how the risks in starting his school were shared by him and the school’s first students and parents:

We called the early adapters our “pioneers.” We always honored those parents. I always tell them, “You guys invested in us, you trusted us.” Who was I? The guy from New York, you know, the smooth talker, the carpet bagger and I often said to them, ‘I’m thrilled that you’re happy with what your child got from us and thank you for taking the risk because it is a big risk.’ Risk-taking is an interesting part of all of this. But, boy, you gotta be an intelligent risk-taker...I was an intelligent risk-taker...There was clearly a risk for me; any change is a risk.

Will there come a day when starting a school will involve less risk, when school founders will not have to start over from scratch? Perhaps future school founders might be better able to predict some of the challenges they might face, and maybe they could prevent certain barriers from impeding their progress or derailing their efforts entirely. However, it is unlikely, given the definition of starting something new, that one could eliminate all

of the surprise and risk from the act of starting a school. These elements are part of the experience.

Create

The third meaning of “start” is to *create*. “School starters have the rare chance to create a thriving educational community from the ground up” (McConaghy, 2006, p. 6).

The idea of being “creative” and “creating” something new stems from the Latin root of the word “create,” *crea*, which suggests producing something and/or making it grow (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=create&searchmode=none/>). To “create” something is to bring it into existence, to give rise to it or make it happen. It also means *to use imagination to invent things*. Creating something further implies that what is created is *the first* of its kind (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>).

A school founder has the chance to invent a school starting with nothing but his or her own thoughts and imagination. By combining and concretizing his or her unique thoughts and philosophies in novel ways, the founder creates something new and different that might not arise otherwise. Some of the same elements of a newly created school may exist: a school structure, a schedule and some sort of curriculum, for example, but in starting a school, each element is created from scratch to match the vision of the school founder. School founder Joe explains that it was the innovative, creative element of starting a school that motivated him to accept the challenge:

If they had said, ‘We want you to set up a school just like [a competitor school],’ I don’t think I would have [agreed to do] it... I am creative and they allowed me to create... I saw this not as a re-making, but as a chance to create. I could have retired and gone fishing in Florida, or started a charter school or just been a good teacher and remained a

leader amongst my peers as opposed to a creator [but] I am creative and school creators are *doers*.

Arendt considers the acts of creation and implementation to be part of our very being, arising from our own birth in what she calls “natality”:

Humans are newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth. Natality means beginning from the beginning, *initium*, which for Arendt enables humans to take initiatives, to begin an action freely. To act is ‘to take initiative, to begin.’ *Initium* here refers to the beginning of human action as opposed to the beginning of the world. (Moran, 2000, p. 313 with quotes from Arendt, 1958, pp. 177-178)

In a sense, a school founder gives birth to a school. There is an initial period of time during which the founder merely thinks about starting a school, which could be likened to the time during which a couple considers having a child. Next, there is a moment of conception, a spark or starting point after which the founder begins the long process of creating the school. Subsequent to that are many months of gestation, during which time the founder builds the school bit by bit and puts into place all the pieces necessary for the school to ultimately “live” on its own. The birth of the school occurs on opening day when it is, like a newborn, presented to the community and begins to function and grow as a separate entity with increasing independence and autonomy.

Although the few “How to Start a School” guides that exist (Starting an Independent School: A Founder’s Handbook by J. McConaghy [2006], Start Your Own Skool: New Skools Manual by New Directions Community School [1973], and The Successful Christian School: Foundational Principles for Starting and Operating a Successful Christian School by AA Baker [1979]) occasionally include brief quotations or side boxes that reveal the deeper aspects of the experience, they more typically present

“How-to” lists, like this one for starting a vocational school (retrieved from <http://www.dpinnell.com/startaschool.htm>):

The Steps

Step 1: Ask yourself the following questions:

Why do you want to start a school?...

Step 2: Organize the information for your business plan...

Step 3: Write an executive summary. ...

Step 4: Describe your [school]...

Step 5: Explain your program offerings...

Step 6: Talk about the market you're entering...

Step 7: Describe your admission/marketing plan...

Step 8: Detail your yearly revenue projections and expenses.

However practical such lists and guides might be, they do not shed much light on the experience of starting a school. As in the example above, they more often list the steps the writer suggests school founders take to accomplish the task efficiently. This approach, with its rigid step-by-step, cookbook-style instructions, may provide guidance and a reality check to school founders, but it also stands in contrast to the creative process inherent in starting a school. Would a school founder with a truly creative vision for a new school simply follow a numbered, linear list of tasks? Would that be starting a school?

On the other hand, how much novelty is realistic when starting a school? To what extent can a school be as new and different as a school founder desires? To what degree does every school founder inevitably draw from his or her own experiences as a student and/or educator in designing a school, thereby *re-creating* rather than *creating* a school? Furthermore, what *is* the meaning of school, and who decides this?

Looking back at the step-by-step guide above, we see that certain assumptions are made about what a school is and what the new school should be like. For example, the

directions imply that the school will use follow-up data on its graduates, such as job placement, to improve its programs; that there will be “courses;” and that the school will need to advertise itself to attract students. To what extent do steps such as these limit the creative space necessary to start a school? On the other hand, how creative can a school founder be before his or her school is deemed *too different* or *too risky* for potential teachers and students to accept?

Out with Open, In with Start

To say that someone “opens” a school, then, does not capture the same elements of surprise, risk, and creativity that “starting” a school does. For this study, I have chosen to explore the lived experience of *starting* a school, with all the surprise, risk and creativity implied. I did not, therefore, elect to include in the study school founders who opened replicas of existing schools, re-opened a mothballed school, or oversaw physical renovations of a school even if those renovations were considered transformative.

Consider for a moment the experience of someone who opens a replica of an existing school. The Loudoun County (VA) public school system has been doing this for many years as the population of the county has exploded. Loudoun built 50 new schools in the past 22 years, and plans to build one or two new schools every year into the foreseeable future (Somashekhar, 2006; St. George, 2013). All new schools use a common architectural design and floor plan, standard materials, and furnishings purchased in bulk. This activity does not qualify as starting new schools in that it is done in a standardized way that purposely minimizes the amount of surprise, risk and creativity in the process so as to capitalize on efficiencies and economies of scale. Likewise, school founders that follow the written guides mentioned above that describe how to start

independent, vocational, and Christian schools in tidy, sequential steps are opening schools but not starting them.

For the purposes of this study, then, a school founder is someone who starts a new school from scratch with his or her own philosophy and creativity as a guide. I also have arbitrarily limited the scope of the lived experience to the years leading up to the opening of the school through the first year or first cycle of the school's operation. With these parameters, I have introduced and bounded the phenomenon of the lived experience of starting a school. Only one aspect of the experience remains to be defined now - what exactly is a school?

What is a School?

What exactly are school founders starting? What is a "school"? The earliest notion of the word *school* is "leisure," from the Greek *skhole* which means "spare time, leisure, rest ease; idleness." This later evolved into the notion of an "otiose discussion" (in Athens or Rome the most popular way to spend free time), then "place for such discussion" (Online Etymology Dictionary, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>).

Ted Sizer offers the time-honored definition of a school by describing one he attended in 1946. His update in 2004 says, "What is remarkable, however, is that so much of the 1946 regimen is still with us" (Sizer, 2004, p. xi):

[*Classes*] of twenty or so [children] gathered by age into *grades* to learn *together* a *subject* both for its *content* and for the *skills* embedded in that content taught by a *single teacher* who is responsible for *delivering* that material, assigning *homework*, and *assessing* each student's performance in a uniform manner, all this proceeding in sequential *blocks of time* of forty to sixty minutes each in a specialized *school building* primarily made up of a

succession of identical rooms that are used for six hours for fewer than half the days in a year....This is what *school* is. (Sizer, 2004, p. xi)

Sizer describes nearly every school and classroom in which I have studied, taught, and observed. This image of a school is so universally accepted, it can be hard to imagine anything else. However, this quintessential definition of a school does not describe the type of school many school founders are creating today.

So what is a school? Must it be a building made of bricks and mortar? Is it a series of classes students take? A regimen? A curriculum? A room with students and teachers? The original notion of the word *school* is "leisure," which evolved into "otiose discussion" (in Athens or Rome the most popular way to spend free time), then "place for such discussion" (Online Etymology Dictionary, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). A look at the Sudbury Valley School, a unique institution established in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts, serves as a good example to use to uncover the quintessential elements that make a school a school.

"We have never had any required studies at any level, ever," writes the founder of the Sudbury Valley School. Sudbury Valley does not give grades, transcripts, or written evaluations. There are no curricula, no teachers (everyone is called a staff member), no regular class periods, no grade levels. Is Sudbury Valley School just a hippie experiment we should dismiss as an anomaly, or is it actually a school? The staff and students call it a school, parents pay for their children to go there to learn, and it is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Its accreditation means it is "run in a professional manner, and [provides] a place where children [are] well educated"

(<http://www.sudval.org/archives>, 17 Jul 1999 00:07:3). Is a school, then, primarily a place?

A Place

Must a school have or be a building? Heidegger suggests that “The way in which I am and you are, the manner in which we humans *are* on earth, is *baun*, dwelling” (1954/1993b, p. 349). We are dwellers, and in order to dwell, we build. We build homes, libraries, and office buildings, and school founders build schools. The word “build” traces from the “Old English word *byldan* ‘construct a house,’” which, in turn, comes “from the Proto-Indo-European base *bhu-* ‘dwell.’” To be sure, every building is not a dwelling nor is a building a prerequisite for dwelling (we can dwell outside) but a building creates a space for dwelling (Snyder, 2009). “Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things” (Heidegger, 1954/1993b p. 350). Are schools then places that cultivate the growing beings that enter them? Do school buildings provide spaces where teachers and students can grow together? Casey writes, “When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become a place” (Casey, 1993, p. 28). Is a school then a space that, with repeated visits to it, becomes familiar enough to students and teachers to become a “place?”

A school is a space and a place where young people gather together to learn. It can be indoors or out, with or without walls, expansive or small. There may or may not be adult teachers within the space. The most basic school is the home school, the place where children learn their very first concepts and skills. Essentially, we are all “homeschooled” for a time. The home (or living space) is also the school in which we

learn some of our most fundamental skills, such as how to walk, how to talk, how to feed ourselves, and how to live with others.

At our first (home) school, we begin to define ourselves in relation to others. Our relationship to, attitude toward, and expectations of the world form and grow in that space. From there, most of us will venture out from our homes to learn elsewhere, reducing our homeschooling from full- to part-time. However, to a large extent, we take our home school along with us to later schools. As Bachelard notes, “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (1994, p. 5). That is to say that, to children heading off to a school outside the home for the first time, school is an extension of home and is inevitably compared to home. Children do not forget their first home/school, nor do they leave behind the things they did and learned there. The schools they attend outside the home are merely extensions of their first school. But, what are these new schools like compared to our original home/school? What features of the home/school continue to be present, and which ones disappear? What is the child/adult ratio in each space? How much do the adults know about the children in each space? How much and what kind of adult intervention is provided for children in each space?

Alternatives to the Homeschool and Traditional School

Most children leave their home/school for a local public school. Some, however, attend so-called *alternative* schools, such as the charter or private schools that are the focus of this study. The word *alternative*, derives from the word *alternate*, from the Latin *alternatus*, meaning to first do one thing and then another, or to take turns between two things. *Alternative* has similar meanings as a noun and an adjective. As a noun, it means “the other of two which may be chosen,” and as an adjective means “offering one

or the other of two” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). When the first private schools opened, they were an alternative to home-schooling. When the first public schools opened, they generally served as an alternative to private schools.

For many children today, there is only one school they can reasonably attend, and that is the local public school. There are, of course, exceptions - some families have the choice of five or more different schools, but this is rare. Most commonly, families are zoned for only one public high school, and would have to pay tuition if they chose to send their children to an out-of-boundary public school or a private school. Should they choose to homeschool or unschool (a form of homeschooling), they would need to make financial and other sacrifices.

“Alternative,” then, with its limit of two options, no longer accurately describes the schools in the educational landscape. The schools on which this study focuses are in a sense alternatives to the “traditional” model of a school, but they are also alternatives to each other. What makes these schools unique is precisely that they are different from the existing schools around them. While home school situations, public schools, and private schools come in many different forms, so do newly opened schools designed and built from scratch.

Two of the more common types of new schools opening up in the United States are charter schools and private (independent) schools. These are generally “bricks-and-mortar” schools that are allowed to operate outside the defined structure of the public school system, to a greater (independent schools) or lesser (charter schools) degree. In 1970, there were only a few truly new and different schools in operation in the United

States (Weinstein, 1986). By 2000, there were thousands of new schools, and the number continues to grow (Conley, 2002). What defines a charter or private school, and how do charter and private schools differ from traditional public schools? In the following two sections, brief summaries of the major contrasting features of charter and private schools are provided for context.

Charter Schools Defined

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools that have a contract or "charter" with either a state agency or a local school board. The word *charter* comes from the Latin *charta*, meaning paper or document and the French *chartre*, meaning charter, letter, document or covenant (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). The first charter schools were begun in Ireland in 1733 by the Charter Society to provide a Protestant education to poor Catholic children:

Forbidding yet curiously forlorn in a number of our towns and villages stand the great hulks that once housed the Charter Schools of the eighteenth century. Built to a model plan, they must surely be a unique set of educational monuments, and should archeology join the ever-lengthening list of the sciences serving the study of education, these gaunt shells of Primate Boulter's "grand design" would surely merit digging. (Milne, 1974, p. 3)

The term "charter" seems to have originated in the 1970s in the United States when New England educator Ray Budde suggested that small groups of teachers be given contracts or "charters" by their local school boards to explore new educational approaches. Albert Shanker, former president of the AFT, then publicized the idea as a way to open an entirely new kind of school with union and teacher approval. In the late 1980s, Philadelphia started a number of schools-within-schools and called them "charters."

The concept of a charter school was later refined in Minnesota where charter schools were developed according to three basic values: opportunity, choice, and responsibility for results. Legislators supported the growth of charter schools in order to create choice for parents and students in the public school system and to encourage innovative teaching practices that might increase the chance that every student would get a high quality education (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

What does it mean for a school to be defined primarily by a contract? Isn't the central feature of every school an agreement, compromise, or contract of some kind? The word "contract" can also imply that something is being made to be narrow or limited. Do charter schools experience a sense of contraction as opposed to a limitless, blossoming freedom and growth? What makes a school a school and a charter school also a school? What features do charter schools and non-charter schools share?

The "charter" part of a charter school details the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and measures of success. Certainly, all schools serve students, but do all of them have a clear mission, and if so, what is the nature of that mission? Do all schools have goals? If so, can they clearly articulate those goals? Certainly, not all schools have "programs" or curricula; the Sudbury Valley schools, of which there are now 37 worldwide, do not have any defined programs or curricula. Likewise, the "unschooling" movement, a more liberal form of homeschooling, does not possess a core program or curriculum and, true to its name, does not consider itself to have or be a "school" at all. Do all schools have methods of assessment and measures of success? The staff members of the Sudbury method schools clearly state that they do not assess students as they prefer to be their guides, not their judges (Greenberg, 1995).

The charter for a charter school also specifies how much public support the school will receive and for how long (usually 3-5 years). Do all schools require funding? I have not yet found a school in the United States that does not require some level of financial support, but schools do vary widely in the amount they need and from where their funding originates. For now, public education dollars fund largely autonomous charter schools, and it is important to consider the effect that any source of funding has on a school. Are there always “strings attached” to a funding source? How does the source of financial resources affect the way in which a school founder designs a school?

A school's charter gives it a certain amount of autonomy over its operation and frees it from some, though not all, of the restrictions placed on other public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This does not prevent a charter school from being a “new” school, distinct from the schools around it, and an alternative to existing schools. It simply means that, as a publicly funded school, a charter school must abide by many of the same rules and parameters as the other public schools in the same jurisdiction.

The basic concept of charter schools is that they are given autonomies not granted to other public schools. This autonomy does not come without appropriate accountability – like all schools, the charter school must demonstrate good academic results and sound fiscal practices to the sponsor that granted the school its charter status, the parents who choose to send their children there, and the public that funds them (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). How does this trade-off between autonomy and accountability play out in the experience of the school founder? If charter schools are not *completely autonomous* because they must maintain certain features, and abide by certain policies, of the public school system within which they operate, is autonomy a necessary goal? How

important is autonomy to a school founder? “Nietzsche and Heidegger describe [autonomy] as our highest achievement” (Siegfried, 1990, p. 619). What does this mean in the realm of school autonomy and achievement? Are school founders reaching for autonomy?

Who are the founders of charter schools and why do they open them? According to the U. S. Department of Education, founders of charter schools generally fall into three categories: grassroots organizations of parents, teachers and community members; entrepreneurs; or existing schools converting to charter status. The most common reasons given for opening a charter school are to realize an educational vision, serve a special population of students, or gain autonomy (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Nearly *two-thirds of newly created charter schools seek to realize an alternative vision of schooling*; one-quarter are founded primarily to serve a special target population of students, and one-third seek to convert to charter status in order to gain autonomy from district and state regulations. It is the founders of two-thirds of newly created charter schools, those that seek to realize a different vision of schooling, in which I am most interested. What is it like to implement a new vision of schooling under such circumstances?

Why do parents and teachers choose charter schools for themselves and/or their children? Do the interests of parents and teachers match those of the school founders? According to the U.S. Charter Schools website, parents and teachers choose charter schools primarily for educational reasons: high academic standards, small overall size (average 250 students), small class size, or innovative approaches.⁵ This suggests that

⁵ In 1991 Minnesota passed the first charter school law, with California following suit in 1992. By 2003, 40 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia had charter schools. "Charter schools are one of the fastest

they believe other schools have lower academic standards, a larger overall size, larger classes and less innovative teaching approaches. Might parents perhaps be trying to replicate the features of the home/school environment in which they first raised and taught their children, an environment of typically high expectations, small size, and individualized teaching methods? Is there always a look back at one's own education before a school founder looks forward?

Most school founders had a moment as a child when they left home for the first time to go to school. This may be an unsettling experience for children, as they leave a world they know well and venture into a world they do not know and in which they have not lived. How does a child imagine his or her place in the world as s/he moves between home and school? Casey suggests that we all seek to know our place in the world. No one wants to be lost at sea, "lacking place in an endless space world" (2009, p. 109). He goes on to say that even when we are able to pinpoint exactly where we are physically on the earth, we "lack a sure sense of where *our own place* is. What we lack, therefore, is twofold: *stabilitas loci* ("stability of place") and inhabitancy in place" (Casey, 2009, p. 109). To find such stability and inhabitancy, we look for cozy, covered spaces. And "When we cannot find a habitable place, we must set about making or building such a place to ensure stable inhabitation. [By this, we gain] not just a measure of security but a basis for dwelling *somewhere in particular*" (Casey, 2009, p. 109). Do school founders start schools in an attempt to fill their need for stability and inhabitancy? Do small, cozy

growing innovations in education policy, enjoying broad bipartisan support from governors, state legislators, and past and present secretaries of education" (U.S. Charter Schools website, retrieved from http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/history.htm). When he was President, Bill Clinton called for the creation of 3,000 charter schools. In 2002, President Bush called for \$200 million to support charter schools and since 1994, the U.S. Department of Education has provided grants to support states' charter school efforts. (U.S. Charter Schools website. Retrieved from http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/history.htm)

charter schools provide that anchor, that sense of dwelling somewhere in particular, that sense of security for those who dwell within them?

The process of opening a charter school typically begins with a vision or idea that is then polished into a proposal and presented to an official decision-making body for approval. Not every charter school proposal is approved. As of this writing (May 8, 2012), the 150,000 student, minority majority county in which I live has no charter schools. The county has rejected all but one charter school proposal ever presented to it. Why is this? Is it because the school system feels it is providing an adequate education to all students and does not need to add anything new or different to its portfolio of programs? Does the system feel its educational options are superior to whatever charter applicants propose? How much of the decision is political? Financial? Cultural? Historical? What does it take to have a charter school proposal approved? What is it like for a school founder to have a proposal rejected, sometimes multiple times? What is it like when a proposal is *approved*? What new experiences lie ahead then?

Once a charter school application is approved, the hard work of starting a school begins: "Practically all charter schools have had to overcome obstacles during their development...most charter schools continue to cite resource limitations - either lack of start-up funds or inadequate operating funds--as serious challenges to their implementation" (Department of Education, 2000). The approved charter itself does not ensure that a school will be successful, or even that it will be easy to measure the school's progress, particularly in the short-term.

Dr. Margaret Raymond, Director of Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, in her 2009 study of several thousand charter schools in 15 states

and Washington, D.C. (covering 70% of the students in charter schools across the nation) found wide variance in the quality of charter schools, but concluded that, in the aggregate, students in charter schools did not fare as well as students in traditional public schools. In fact, only 17% of the charter schools were providing "superior education opportunities" for their students; 46% were no different from traditional schools, and 37% delivered results that were worse than public schools (Raymond, 2009).⁶ A follow-up study Raymond published in 2011 based on charter schools in New York City found very different results: "Overall the results found that the typical student in a New York City charter school learns more than their virtual counterparts in their feeder pool in reading and mathematics" (Raymond, 2011). Who decides what to measure in studies of charter schools, and do school founders use these same criteria to design and evaluate the success of their schools?

It is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from charter school outcome studies, except perhaps to say that some charter schools are able to accomplish particular measurable goals while others are not. Some studies use math and reading scores on state achievement tests as the sole determinant of a school's success. Are these the only outcomes that matter? Is society's universal definition of school success based only on student reading and math exam performance? Studies done on charter schools rarely attempt to evaluate harder-to-measure outcomes such as the humane qualities of the

⁶ "The Stanford report, entitled, "*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*," is the first detailed national assessment of charter school impacts since its longitudinal, student-level analysis covers more than 70 percent of the nation's students attending charter schools. The peer reviewed analysis looks at student achievement growth on state achievement tests in both reading and math with controls for student demographics and eligibility for program support such as free or reduced-price lunch and special education. The analysis includes the most current student achievement data from 15 states and the District of Columbia and gauges whether students who attend charter schools fare better than if they would have attended a traditional public school" (From a June 15, 2009 Stanford University press release entitled, *New Stanford Report Finds Serious Quality Challenge in National Charter School Sector*).

school, the innovativeness of educational practices, the autonomy of graduates, or other elements school founders may value.

While the outcomes of public charter schools continue to be debated, charter schools remain a popular and fast-growing school model. What does this mean for the educational landscape of tomorrow? Will charter schools prove to be “better” than already existing schools? Will their numbers continue to grow? Who will be starting the charter schools of the future and what goals will they have? On what measures will they be evaluated? How will the presence of charter schools affect the educational landscape for other schools, parents, students, and teachers?

Private Schools Defined

Unlike charter schools, private or independent schools are non-public, and as such are funded and controlled by individuals and agencies other than the government.

“Independent schools come in many shapes and sizes, and are affiliated with a variety of philosophies, cultures and religions, such as non-denominational, Lutheran, Islamic and Steiner schools” (The Parents’ Website for parents of children in independent schools, retrieved from <http://www.independentschoolparents.com.au/info/glossary.html#i1>). In the United States, the terms “private” and “independent” are interchangeable. Since private schools are not supported by taxpayers, they generally raise their operating funds through tuition, private gifts and, in some cases, the income earned from an endowment (McGraw Hill Glossary retrieved from http://highered.mcgrawhill.com/sites/0073525901/student_view0/glossary.html).

The founder of a private school does not need to propose a charter and have it approved to obtain the rights and funding necessary to open a school. However, in exchange for the freedom to implement any kind of educational program in any way the school founder desires, s/he must acquire all necessary resources to operate the school without public financial support. In addition, contributions to a private school may come with strings attached. Parents who pay tuition may feel entitled to make certain demands on the school given their financial investment. Local businesses that donate money, goods, or services to the school may want something in return. This complete dependence on non-public funds can make it difficult for a private school to spend its financial resources in an optimal and completely liberated manner.

The population of children attending private schools in the United States has been steady at 6 million since 1995, but is predicted to increase to 6.1 million by 2017 (Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the National Center for Education Statistics, Department of Education, retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=65>). To accommodate the growing number of private school students, either existing private schools will have to grow larger or new private schools will be established.

What does all this mean for the mix and balance of schools in the future? Will families generally have more school options? Which children – all children, or only those who can pay private school tuition? Will future school options be more attractive to parents and students? Will schools be more effective? By what measure? Will starting a private or charter school become easier? Harder? What can we learn by studying the lived experience of starting a charter or private school, and how might this

knowledge influence the education field and improve education for more of our young people?

The Agent – The School Founder

This study focuses on the lived experience of school founders, individuals who start or "found" schools. It is fitting that the word *founder* has two different but equally appropriate meanings in this context. The first is that of *founder* as a noun, meaning creator, initiator, originator, and organizer (Microsoft Word Thesaurus). The founder is the protagonist in this adventure, the bold initiator who steps out to create something new by starting a school. The founder is also the person who gives the school its *foundation*.

The other meaning of founder, as a verb, is to fail, break down, come to nothing, or fall through. Indeed, as they attempt to organize, build and open a school, often with little experience, advantage, or support, school founders take many risks and face unexpected surprises and challenges that may threaten their progress. These challenges at times cause school founders to stumble or fall so seriously that their entire effort fails. Indeed, as they take risks and face the unexpected, it is common for school founders to *founder* as they start their own schools.

Motivators

Most educators do not found their own schools. What allows some people to accept existing educational systems while others are motivated to break from tradition and start their own schools? In a preliminary conversation with a school founder who later became a participant in this study, the school founder describes how reflecting on his own education made him first question our educational system:

I didn't think much about my educational experience when I was going through it, but in retrospect I realized how

harmful it was and how damaging it was, even though I went to [purportedly one of the best schools in the country] in [its] heyday.

Travis concurs saying that, despite the existence of very well-regarded school systems, "there exist far too many that fail in their quest to properly educate America's children" (Travis, 2005, p. xi). But, how much discontent or disappointment does it take before a person summons the courage to spurn the status quo and assume the myriad risks required to start a school? How dissatisfied must a person become and how much "crap" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 5) is an educator willing to put up with before he takes action?

Back in the late 60s, Postman and Weingartner predicted that the number of school founders would decline because we are no longer raising children to become the sorts of critical thinkers who might become school founders. As Postman and Weingartner argue, we are producing fewer "people who have been educated to recognize change, to be sensitive to problems caused by change, and who have the motivation and courage to sound alarms when entropy accelerates to a dangerous degree" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 4). Postman and Weingartner refer to these people as "crap detectors" and refers to this activity as "crap detecting" (p. 5). Did Postman and Weingartner's prediction come true? Are there fewer adults today who have the critical skills and desire to recognize change and "sound alarms" when they sense "crap"?

Certainly, the school founders who are the focus of this study are "crap detectors," people who are aware that the world has changed, recognize the educational problems caused by those changes, and have the "motivation and courage" to respond accordingly. Indeed, school founders at the earliest stages of the journey often find fault

with what they see in the educational system around them, and are able to envision a new "normal." They see the world of education from a unique perspective and, at a certain point, stop accepting what *is* and begin the process of creating what *might be*.

Slow Change to Imagination

Slow Change

Just think about what you and I have been through
And tell me why I should not be afraid
I said, "I don't want to hear about the promises they told
us"
I said, "I don't wanna hear about the progress that we
made"

Slow change, yeah, don't mean nothing, yeah, to me, yeah

Well fear not, cause my fear soon turns to anger
As I watch my world get ruined by a pristine hand
And I'm out here, saying, "Excuse me," like a stranger
'Cause I never did learn how to say, "Isn't this grand?"

Slow change, yeah, don't mean nothing, yeah, to me
(Blues Traveler, lyrics retrieved from
www.songlyricsx.com)

Replacing routine, unconscious, well-entrenched thoughts with an imagination takes time, especially when we are trying to reconcile the past with the present. As Dewey suggests, in trying to reconcile our past with what we see today, there can be unconscious, routine, mechanical uniformity. Our imagination and dreams are inaccessible, free-floating, unattached to anything. And yet, our imagination is the only force powerful enough to override this (Dewey, 1934). Greene says, "People trying to be more fully human must not only engage in critical thinking but must be able to imagine something coming of their hopes" (1995, p. 25).

To tap into the imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and

independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or 'common-sensible' and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is. (Greene, p. 19)

Imagining "what might be" and making changes is never easy. It works against our desire for the familiar and our desire for stability. "Exploring unexplored alternatives serves to intensify the unease of those who want perhaps most of all to recover the simpler world of a time long past" (Greene, 1995, p. 18). It is natural, then, to long for a familiar and simple past, to fear unexplored and unfamiliar alternatives, to embrace change and convert dreams into reality. It takes time to unwrap tradition. It takes time to find the gaps created by a changing world context. It takes time to overturn outdated ideas and practices, and to take action to make changes. It takes time to accept that what we are accustomed to is not etched in stone. Indeed, "Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and even outright lies" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 3).

While one's own experience in school and one's later experience as an adult (and possibly as a parent or teacher) may motivate one to "spring" into action, for most people this awareness and agency build more slowly, changing gradually with the changing times. Left to their own devices, schools do change along with a changing roster of students and teachers every year. But how, and how quickly, do schools adapt to change?

Some educators today are frustrated by how slowly school systems are adapting to changes in the world. Our schools have not kept pace, they say, and our traditional content and teaching methods no longer serve students well. Why has the adaptation to a

new world context been so slow for schools? One possibility is that changes in the world have taken place so gradually over so many years that the changes are nearly imperceptible. If changes were larger or more sudden, perhaps they would catch our attention more easily and motivate us to take action more immediately.

Small, gradual changes simply are more likely to go unnoticed. Consider the fable of the frog and the boiling water:

If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death. (Quinn, 1996, p. 29)

Are most of us like the frog in that we do not notice subtle changes around us because they are so small? How do we continue to live with the changes, barely noticing their existence or meaning in our lives? What societal interests are served to keep schools in this “conserving” state? What gets conserved?

We might notice small changes, but choose to ignore them, at least initially. It is easier to believe that everything is fine just the way it is. It is easier *not* to change anything. After all, who wants to be the one to doubt the same school system that nurtured generations of productive citizens and is currently educating the next generation? The system worked for most of us, and should also work for our children. It is easier to accept an existing system than to question it or go to the extreme lengths necessary to change it. Greene posits that “Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it...can we see our givens as contingencies” (1995, p. 23). And only at that point,

when we can imagine a different future, when we can combine the past and the possible in a new way, do we have “an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices” (Idem.).

Jane Tompkins writes that, as a child, she experienced a nearly imperceptible gap between what she expected from school and what she received. This disconnect negatively and permanently affected her future expectations and desires. Like the frog in the rapidly warming water, she experienced a subtle, gradual awareness that there was something missing from her education, that her expectations and the reality of her education were not in alignment. The gradual nature of her growing awareness of this disconnect allowed her to endure years of dissatisfaction without realizing what was happening:

What I expected from school and what I got were different beyond belief...I didn't know it was happening: it didn't happen all at once; and I couldn't have told you what it was exactly that was going on. But as what I experienced clashed absolutely with my inward expectations and desires, the shape of my future-desire or expectations I might have had was forever blunted. (Tompkins, 1996, p. 15)

Those of us who remain complacent while subtle changes occur all around us may at some point find ourselves in a dangerous place, especially as changes in the world rapidly accelerate, leading to a speeding up of all processes. Ships, trains, cars and planes all move much more quickly than they did 50 years ago. In 1945, it took a plane two weeks to fly around the world. Today, it can be done in less than a day, and a satellite can circle the earth in an hour (Heylighen, 2000). Information transmission also gets faster every year, as has the pace of scientific innovation. Those who move too slowly can easily be left behind.

If we never acknowledge what is happening, we might be boiled alive like the frog. As Greene says, we must “attend to the smothering and silencing consequences of our submergence in the ‘cotton wool’ of ‘non-being’ or the taken-for-granted” (1995, p. 107). But, if we *do* acknowledge that the world is changing and that we must change with it, with whom and when do we discuss these discoveries and fears? Or do we ignore it all because to take action would upset our worldview? And to acknowledge needed change might upset our trust in all that has gone before, and our faith in all that has been done to and for us.

Dispatch from Devereux Slough

The gulls have no idea.
The distant bark of sea lions gives nothing away.
The white-tailed kite flutters and hunts.
The pelicans perform their sloppy angling.
The ironbark eucalyptus dwells in ignorance and beauty.
And the night herons brood in their heronry like yoga
masters, each balanced on a twig.
The world has changed.
The news will take some time to get here.
(Jarman, 2011,
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22210>)

The news has reached some, though. Somehow, school founders see and acknowledge the changes in the world and the need for our schools to respond to them. And they act. They are the frogs that jump out of the boiling water.

Taking Action – Becoming an Educational Pioneer

Initially, people are not unlike the contented frog. Indeed, a “general inability to conceive a better order of things can give rise to a resignation that paralyzes and prevents people from acting to bring about change” (Greene, 1995, p.19). We are so submerged in the “given, in what appears impervious to protest and discontent” (p.19), that we cannot

imagine things being otherwise. At some point, however, school founders reach an awareness that they must leave something behind in order to reach toward something new. This awareness must be linked to imagination (Greene, 1995). Dewey believed that human consciousness inevitably has an imaginative phase. It is this imagination that is ultimately capable of breaking through the “inertia of habit” (Dewey, 1934, p. 284). Indeed, “Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed” (Greene, 1995, p. 22).

A school founder’s hope for a different future at some point reaches a place of action. We have choices, says Greene. We can deny the world and flee from it in a fit of hopelessness, or we can use our imagination to guide us into action. “Hope,” she says, “does not consist in crossing one’s arms and waiting” (Greene, 1995, p. 24). According to Warnock, “It is imagination – with its capacity to both make order out of chaos and open experience to the mysterious and the strange – that moves us to go in quest, to journey where we have never been” (in Greene, 1995, p. 23).

Likewise, Heidegger proposes that people take action (praxis) because they want to make a new beginning in an attempt to stabilize chaos. He writes:

What does "praxis" mean? We usually translate the Greek term as "deed" and "activity," understanding by this the actualization of goals, carrying out of plans and aiming at outcomes and results. We measure all this according to how our "praxis" immediately, palpably, and visibly changes and "sets up" the actual that is at hand. (Heidegger, 1961, p. 85)

With their first tentative steps, school founders may be seeking greener pastures, better options for themselves and their children. They venture out to see what is available, and begin to think about what is possible. They become educational pioneers.

In her book, *On the Journey to Open a New School: One Step at a Time*, Brenda Travis writes:

A Word to the Wise: In deciding to pursue your vision, you have elected to assume the role of pioneer or risk-taker. You have made the decision to embrace the boldest of challenges head on. In doing so, you will deviate from what is comfortable or customary. (Travis, 2005, p. xvi)

The word “pioneer” derives from the French *pionnier*, a descendant of the Old French *paonier*. “This originally denoted a ‘foot soldier sent on ahead to clear the way,’ and was a derivative of *paon* ‘foot soldier’ (whose Anglo-Norman version *poun* gave English the word *pawn*)” (Retrieved from <http://www.word-origins.com/definition/pioneer.html>).

The pioneer, then, is the first person out, the one asked to explore an unknown territory on behalf of those who follow behind. By accepting this charge, the pioneer assumes a certain amount of personal risk and danger. Who knows what he will find out there? Sun or rain? Friend or foe? Greener pastures or browner ones? And yet, out he goes, in an effort to clear the way for others, to remove barriers and forge a safe path for those who follow.

The pioneer ventures out from a place of relative safety to search for greener pastures for himself and for those following behind. Since by definition the pioneer is the first person to explore the new territory, he may do so alone, with the rest of the group following only after the pioneer has found a clean, clear path for his comrades. The others usually stay where they are until the right time, in a place of comfort and familiarity. For educators, this place of comfort and familiarity is an educational space they believe has served them well, or at least a space they are not willing to question much yet, let alone abandon.

Just like bees, ants, birds, and other mammals, humans are social animals and are unaccustomed to being alone. As such, we would rather be together, and we instinctively seek out safety in numbers. Ursula Le Guin, informed by an analysis of text written by decoding touch gland secretions by (highly social) ants, suggests there is no word for “alone” in Ant and that the ants’ language does not have a first person singular tense (Le Guin, 1987). We need each other and we prefer not to be alone. Yet the pioneer really does go it alone.

It must be hard to be the pioneer. It is lonely and dangerous out there. Maybe that is why so few choose the role of pioneer. The pioneer is the expendable soldier, sent out in case a land mine or other danger lurks ahead. Who wants to be a pioneer? Which of us consider ourselves expendable? Who among us is unafraid to step on a land mine? But, the pioneer school founder ventures out anyhow, despite the risks and dangers. He leaves the reassurance of what is expected and taken for granted to explore new terrain with the hope that his pioneering will be beneficial in some way.

In a preliminary conversation with a school founder in 2010, “Todd” speaks of being a lonely pioneer. He acknowledges feeling alone, being in danger, and being perceived as brave:

Everyone tells me what great things I am doing, and how hard it is what I am doing, and how brave I am...I [am] sacrificing...it becomes a very isolating experience...[I need to] figure out how to protect myself.

How do school founders push past the solitary nature of the task, and through the risks and dangers of starting a school? Are they martyrs, or will they ultimately emerge wearing the bumps and bruises of the experience like badges of honor?

Seeking a School of Dreams

Educational pioneers, possibly as distinct from other types of pioneers, do not leave their flock without some measure of expectation that things are, or could be, better elsewhere. I had seen “greener pastures,” better and more exciting schools that felt right to me where children seemed to be thriving. The first was the preschool I visited as a 7th grader, but there were others subsequently. The idea that someone might see or imagine a "greener pasture" and then strive to reach it appears throughout our history. Martin Luther King, Jr. alluded to being in this place in his 1968 "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech:

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! (Martin Luther King, 1968)⁷

In a preliminary conversation with another school founder, who ultimately participated in my study, “Joe” also saw a greener pasture, a promised land on the other side of the mountain. For decades as a public high school science teacher, he had witnessed “educational failures” all around him, but he found that by being a radically different sort of teacher, he could achieve success within his own classroom with the same students other teachers were unable to reach. Joe began to dream about what he refers to as a “school of dreams,” a school unlike any other and even unlike other

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," delivered April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.

people's images of a "school of dreams." He sold his home and moved 400 miles to start a school based on this unique vision:

I knew what a school of dreams should be like. There is actually a book called *School of Dreams* and I was asked to give a public talk about this book. I read the book and was horrified. It was the school of nightmares. It was hyper-competitive. I said this book should be re-titled because it's all about pressure; it's **not** about learning or dreams.

Joe realized he was rejecting the status quo and pioneering into unknown territory to build his school of dreams. He (and his wife) worried about the possibility that there would be emotional, financial and professional consequences for his actions. He was aware of the risks he would be assuming, and often questioned whether he was doing the right thing.

Becoming a Renegade and Reaching the Point of No Return

After some amount of consideration, some educators turn their backs on their previously held beliefs and steadfastly and boldly take a step forward up a road less traveled. These educational pioneers have become renegades. The *Encarta Dictionary* defines a renegade as a:

Traitor- someone who abandons previously held beliefs or loyalties

Rebel - someone who chooses to live outside laws or conventions

The traitor/rebel/renegade/school founder proactively sets a new direction for himself rather than just waiting, as the pioneer might, for a new direction to emerge.

In "The Seven Characteristics of a Good Leader," Maurice Elias argues that this part of the journey is critical for school founders. Specifically, he asserts that educational

leaders must be renegades in order to bring their schools to new places and to restore what he calls "true education."

They have to be willing to follow their convictions and bring their organization to new places. In education, this is most sorely needed in response to the test-based regimen that has taken over our schools at the expense of true education and social-emotional and character development. (Edutopia, retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/Successful-school-leadership-social-emotional-learning-maurice-elias/>, April 4, 2011)

In 1947, *Time Magazine* wrote that John Dewey and William Kilpatrick, too, "both, in their time, had been rebels."⁸ In the same article, we find the story of educator Boyd Bode:

The son of a stern Calvinist preacher, Boyd Bode was brought up to be "a good 16th Century Calvinist." At school in Illinois, he dutifully mastered his catechism, the doctrines of predestination and a high tariff. At home one day, young Bode remarked that something might be said for Evolution. His father rushed out of the house, hitched up his horses, and drove all day, praying for his son's soul. "For me," said Bode, "it was a period of unmitigated suffering..."...Wherever he went, his agonizing doubts shadowed him. Though not by temperament a rebel ("I tried to be a good boy"),...in desperation, he turned to the works of William James and Dewey, first to criticize, then to be converted.

According to Jardine et al., the abandonment of beliefs and loyalties lands the renegade "in hot water" (2008, p. 80). Just as the stories of Lilith, Eve, and Pandora warn, we should not "disobey the master or displease God" (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 79). We are reminded that those who stray are "the source of all evil in the universe. And their stories, told from generation to generation, re-inflict the primal punishment of the initial sin upon each one of us, generation after generation" (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 79).

⁸ "Education Rebel." *Time Magazine*, Monday, November 24, 1947, retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,887783,00.html>

Surviving renegades make sacrifices in order to stay the course, in order to hang on to their values, and in order to continue along the road less traveled with the requisite amount of confidence. A cliff may loom ahead, but at this point for the school founder, there is no turning back:

I'm through with doubt
There's nothing left for me to figure out
I've paid a price
And I'll keep on paying...

I know you said
Can't you just get over it
It turned my whole world around
And I kind of like it...
(From the song, "I'm Not Ready to Make Nice" by the
Dixie Chicks, 2006)

At a certain point, school founders are “through with doubt” and start to actually like the idea of starting their own school. In this study, their leap of faith comes from a place of certainty and confidence that takes the school founder from pioneer to renegade. S/he has by now abandoned previously held beliefs and elected to live outside convention. It is at this point that s/he sees no better option than to acknowledge the risks ahead and jump off the cliff.

Brenda Travis's book *On the Journey to Open a New School: One Step at a Time*, begins with a chapter called, “Defy Reality and Dare to Dream.” Joe and Todd dared to dream. They changed their minds about what was acceptable in the realm of education. They became tired of upholding tradition and trusted their instincts instead. They rejected powerful, existing cultural norms. They defied the odds and confidently made the leap into an unpredictable world in which they hoped to be able to fly. Something

had changed within them, and they were no longer contented to play by the established rules. They trusted their instincts and took the leap:

Something has changed within me
Something is not the same
I'm through with playing by the rules
Of someone else's game
Too late for second-guessing
Too late to go back to sleep
It's time to trust my instincts
Close my eyes: and leap!
It's time to try
Defying gravity
I think I'll try
Defying gravity
And you can't pull me down!
(From the lyrics of the song, "Defying Gravity" from the Broadway show, "Wicked," retrieved from <http://www.metrolyrics.com/defying-gravity-lyrics-wicked.html>)

How confident and determined do school founders need to be to embark on such a risky, rebellious activity? What is it like for them to defy the norms and values of years of tradition and walk a road less traveled? What allows them to overcome the powerful unseen forces that govern our existence?

Sartre sees man as a traveler in an express-bound train bound for a destination chosen by him, and stopping nowhere...Sartre's cult of melodramatic and unswerving commitment [seeks to] prevent norms and values from being governing forces. He sees them as following the act and as brought into being by them. (Stewart, 1998, pp. 32-33)

Perhaps on some level, then, it is human nature to want to have a purpose. "It's in our nature to seek purpose," says Daniel Pink (2009, p. xi). Pink goes on to say that the most highly motivated people align their desires to a cause larger than themselves and attempt to maximize their purpose by setting and reaching goals, by taking action.

In the first section of this chapter, I opened the elements of this phenomenon: the school founder; the elements of surprise, risk, and creation that comprise the starting of a school; definitions of a school and alternative forms of schooling (charter and private schools, homeschooling and unschooling). The latter part of the chapter explored the action that transforms an educator into a pioneer and later into a rebel or renegade who reaches a point of no return and takes a leap of faith in order to start a school. In the next chapter, I explore the philosophical groundings of the phenomenon of starting a school and describe the process by which I conducted my study.

CHAPTER 3:
HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDINGS
AND METHODOLOGY

What does it mean to study the “lived experience” of something, and how might the lived experience of starting a school best show itself? In this study, I have used hermeneutic phenomenology to uncover the essence of the experience, thereby bringing us back "To the things themselves!" (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 24). This allows us to explore the elements of the experience as it exists in its most basic form, and to attach possible meanings to the themes that emerge.

Finding a Research Methodology

There are many ways to conduct social science research. One can do experiments, collect oral histories, prepare case studies, conduct surveys, or analyze archival information. Each study has particular advantages and disadvantages depending upon the research question, the control the researcher has over actual events, and whether the research is focused on modern or historical phenomena (Yin, 2003).

My question is not, "How does someone start a school?" or "Which type of new school is better - Type A or Type B?" My question is, “What is the essence of the lived experience of starting a school?” Other questions might be answered nicely with ordered lists or carefully acquired quantitative data. The experiences I am studying do not fit the criteria for a quantitative study well, because the events under study have already taken place. The school founders who participated in the study were individuals who have already lived through the experience of starting a school and operating it for at least a

year. This of course means I have no control over the events I am studying and cannot manipulate them to help answer my question. They have already happened.

In addition, the phenomenon under study took place within a real-life context, not an experimental one. Therefore, the question, "What is the essence of the lived experience of starting a school?" calls for a deep interpretive encounter with the phenomenon. It is a question that motivates us to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon as it remains etched in the body and mind of the school founders who experienced it. The ideal way in which to get to the truth of the matter of such a question, then, is with the support and guidance of hermeneutic phenomenology. To engage with this methodology, I have stepped outside the social science tradition and into the philosophic realm of the human sciences.

The Search for Truth

A search for Truth is at the core of our being and it motivates us in life and in research. Heidegger points out that, in its earliest (Greek) sense, what is *true* is the "straightforward sensuous apprehending of something" (1972/1993a, p. 79). That is, a deep understanding of an experience begins with our ability to *feel* it, using our senses. It is through these pure and original sensations (seeing, hearing, etc.) that we generate an understanding of something that allows us to know what is true (Heidegger, 1972/1993a).

It is our goal in hermeneutic phenomenology to strip away any unreflective, taken-for-granted expectations and open our minds to what *really is there* (Pinar et al., 1995) in an attempt to more closely approach the truth. Over the two thousand years between when ideas were first put forward and today, society has used historical reflection to confirm and justify these original truths. "It is remarkable that what we

ourselves took as self-evident concerning the essence of truth already counted as such [in the Middle Ages with Thomas Aquinas and in antiquity with Aristotle]” (Heidegger, 1988/2002, p. 6). Now, we must “obtain a *distance* from what we take as self-evident, from what lies all too close to us” (p. 6). In other words, we must look beyond the well-entrenched, day-to-day, ordinary, “accepted” beliefs about the world to uncover more original, deeper truths.

The process of phenomenology requires us to look at the world anew by pushing preconceived notions aside and *describing* what appears to us rather than falling back on what we *expect* to find or *explaining* or *analyzing* what we observe. Phenomenology does not provide finite answers, nor does it solve problems. It is a human science profoundly concerned with mindful descriptions of a lived experience that bring us to understand more fully what it means to be human (van Manen, 2007, p. 12).

Moran writes, "Whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness" (Moran, 2000, p. 4). But, it is not the manifestation of a thing in our consciousness that is necessarily “true.” The Greek expression for truth, *aletheia*, translates to *unhiddenness*. That is, something that is true is not hidden anymore (Heidegger, 1988/2002, p. 7). The Greeks consider these revelations to be, “Not assertions, not sentences and not knowledge, but the beings [*das Seiende*] themselves, the totality of nature: the human world and the work of God” (Ibid., p. 9). How can we tap into what reaches our consciousness to find greater, deeper truths?

As Gadamer points out, what we call *sensus communis*, or common sense, has long directed our affairs. Common sense is not the same as facts, and it often directs our affairs in situations “where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark” (Gadamer,

1960/1994, p. 25). That is to say, as a practical matter we do not always do what we do because there are facts and data to guide our actions. Sometimes we do what we do simply by instinct or common sense. New mothers do not need data to prove to them they should care for their children, any more than falling in love requires evidence and rationality: “Love does not demonstrate, but often against reason rends the heart at the beloved’s approach” (Gadamer, p. 28). Our life world is not a neat and controllable place we can effectively manipulate to suit our needs based on data we collect in so-called "objective" experiments.

Presenting the philosophy of Vico, Gadamer writes, “What gives the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race” (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 21). This communal sense for what is true and right is not based on argumentation or data, but on what is most convincing given what is evident to the community. The reconciliation between the facts and our experience of them is not important or even likely. What does matter to us in the end is what we experience. And by using hermeneutic phenomenology to illuminate our lived experiences, we do our best to discover both the particular, individual experiences humans have, and the possible universal⁹ aspects of an experience embodied within a group of us. Abram writes:

Perception is...reciprocity, the ongoing exchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness - and often, even *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed

⁹ Van Manen does not claim that a universal theme will be generalizable to a larger population, but simply that it arose from within the experiences of the particular group of people under study. As such, it is particular to them, not necessarily to all of humankind.

pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it. (1996, pp. 52-53)

Practically speaking, then, what we learn from a phenomenological study both *responds to* and *informs* the life-world in which we live. “The *sensus communis* is concerned only with things that all men [sic] see daily before them, things that hold an entire society together, things that are concerned as much with truths and statements as with the arrangements and patterns comprised in statements...” (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 27).

What if participants in my study did not remember their experience exactly as it occurred? Does this render their descriptions of the experience useless? Quite the contrary. In phenomenology, the focus is not on being factual; I am not interested in evaluating the accuracy of the facts given to me. Instead, I am interested in finding what stands behind the words and between the lines conveyed by the school founders. I am even interested in what they did *not* talk about. “We can never achieve perfect objectivity, rationality, or accuracy in our beliefs. Instead, we can strive to be less subjective, less irrational, and less wrong” (Silver, 2012, p. 259).

Again, the Greek word for truth means “not hidden.” It does not mean “factually accurate.” When Aristotle spoke of philosophizing to find “truth,” he did not mean “that philosophy must put forward correct and valid propositions, but that philosophy seeks beings in their unhiddenness as beings” (Heidegger, 1988/2002, p. 9). “Truth as unhiddenness and truth as correctness are quite different things...and cannot at all be equated” (Heidegger, p. 8).

Instead of seeking perfection and correctness, then, I have endeavored to discover/uncover/wrest from its hiddenness what the experience of starting a school is

like. What matters is a school founder's lived memory of the experience from within his or her embodiment of the experience. I have attempted to elicit evidence of the experience from the memory embedded within the participant's body and brain as expressed by his or her own words. A poster I saw recently in my son's high school English classroom said: *I will not remember what you say or do to me, only how you made me feel.* That is precisely what I am after – the corporeal memory school founders have with regard to the experience of starting a school.

I come from the world of science, a world of double-blind, controlled clinical trials that produce empirical data that can be manipulated and interpreted to show generalizable "results." For years, I was taught to trust only the outcomes of well-controlled, quantitative scientific experiments. The philosopher and "Father" of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, likewise began his career with a heavily quantitative focus; he studied physics and astronomy and earned a doctorate in mathematics. However, he came to believe that the "life world" or *Lebenswelt* could not be observed by the objective logic of science, but was in fact a world seen in our subjective experience, a world that requires interpretation.

Embracing hermeneutic phenomenological analysis has required a significant paradigm shift in my thinking. Instead of employing "empirical and analytical research that predicts, explains, or controls" (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 448), I am seeking in this study the type of knowledge Habermas would categorize as best opened up through "interpretive, naturalistic, and constructivist research that seeks to understand" (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 448). "The interpretive disciplines suggest...that there is a 'truth' to be had, an understanding to be reached, in the provocative, unmethodical incidents of our

lives, a truth that is despoiled and thus left out of consideration by the methodical severances requisite of empirical work" (Husserl, 1970; Jardine et al., 2006, p. 156). It is this type of truth I am seeking.

Husserl (1970) maintains that we can to a certain extent "bracket" our perceptions, setting them aside in order to see things from outside ourselves. This allows us to dig more deeply and objectively into the innate dimensions or universal grammar of an experience. Husserl writes:

Only a radical inquiry back into subjectivity - and specifically the subjectivity which ultimately brings about all world-validity, with its content and in all its prescientific and scientific modes, and into the 'what' and the 'how' of the rational accomplishments - can make objective truth comprehensible and arrive at the ultimate ontic [relating to real existence] meaning of the world. (1970, p. 69)

Husserl suggests that our surface understanding of the world and what we deem to be true about the world as adults, is merely an extension of the status quo and has become, in our culture, disconnected from the original preconditions of those truths. However, using phenomenological and hermeneutic methodology, we can discover meaning by reactivating the construction of ideas that have become hidden over time. If we look beyond what appears at the surface of our subjective consciousness, we can find the roots of knowledge. All knowledge, according to Husserl, arises from this sort of hermeneutic analysis of our experiences (Husserl, 1970).

What new knowledge, what approximate truths, am I seeking to establish with this study? First, I want to know what it is like to start a school. What is the essence of the experience? Second, how can I make sense of the experience and use that

understanding to add to our knowledge of the phenomenon in particular and educational practices in general?

Human Science Research

In this study, I am not seeking the truth about something tangible, as is often the case with scientific research, but about human existence and experience. My study explores the lived experience of a particular group of *human beings*, in this case, people who have started schools. My question, therefore, is best explored by human science research.

Human science research allows us to uncover the primal essence of a human experience and then, as educators, use what we see and learn to improve the education of our children (van Manen, 2007). "For us this phenomenological interest of doing research materializes itself in our everyday practical concerns as parents, teachers, teacher educators, psychologists, child care specialists, or school administrators" (van Manen, 2007, p. 12).

According to van Manen (2007), "There is no systematic argument, no sequence of propositions we must follow in order to arrive at a conclusion, a generalization, or a truth statement" (p. 173). Gadamer refers to Vico's philosophy when he writes, "Education cannot, [Vico] says, tread the path of critical research" (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 21). This type of research cannot be replaced by science. Scientifically studying the lived experience of starting a school would not yield a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Phenomenological research, however, is able to grasp and inform the circumstances, contexts, and situations of the experience in their infinite variety, rather than attempting to control and measure them.

In this study, I examine the lived experience of several school founders to uncover the particular, as well as universal, experience of starting a school. I am looking for existential dimensions school founders experience when they engage in such an undertaking. In the following section, I address the philosophy and methodology that comprise hermeneutic phenomenology, the research approach I have used to allow the lived experience of starting a school to show itself to me.

Phenomenology and Its Essence

Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense, as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experienter. (Moran, 2000, p. 4)

Phenomenology means...to let what shows itself be seen...bringing us "To the things themselves!" (Heidegger, 1988/1993a, p. 81)

At first, I found phenomenology to be confusing and obtuse. Now, however, I consider phenomenological research compelling in that it gives us a way to answer questions that other research methods cannot. The deep, two-way conversation and level of understanding accomplished through a phenomenological study has the potential to be elucidating and applicable in a unique way.

In his book, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, Max van Manen (2007) presents phenomenology as a many-faceted research methodology that includes: the study of lived experience, the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness, the study of essences, the description of the experiential meanings as we live them, the human scientific study of phenomena, the attentive practice of thoughtfulness, a search for what it means to be

human, and a poetizing activity that has no conclusion or summary. Phenomenology is not analytical or generalizable; it is not speculative or unworldly; it is neither mere particularity nor sheer universality, and it does not problem solve (van Manen, 2007).

Allow me to unpack these dimensions a bit further.

Phenomenology allows us to understand a lived experience deeply and to apply that understanding to life. What is it like to give birth? What is it like to attend school in a foreign country? What is it like to nearly drown? All of these are phenomena that can best be explored by asking people who have experienced them to describe the experience as they remember it. With this study, I have endeavored to open the experiences of school founders to reveal elements of their experience in starting a school, elements that may be so much a "matter of course" to them that they no longer even notice them. This opening of the experience does not involve data or statistics and is not deductive in any way, but rather discloses the experience and interprets it hermeneutically. Heidegger writes:

"To disclose" and "disclosedness" are used as technical terms...and mean "to unlock" - "to be open." Thus, "to disclose" never means anything like "obtaining something indirectly by inference." (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 70)

The idea of hermeneutic phenomenology is to uncover the manner in which a finite part of a person's life is lived in relation to a phenomenon. The goal is not to gather and explain numerical data about some aspect of the experience, or compare their experiences to mine (I have never started a school), but rather to understand the experience as it is lived by the school founders, "to attempt to get inside the mind of the other, while still treating the other *as other* and not reducing one's understanding to what is within one's own experience" (Moran, 2000, p. 276).

Lived Experience

Phenomenology revolves around the idea that our lived experience, our first-hand accounts of our lives, are a valid form of knowledge. Phenomenological research begins and ends with lived experience, “because it is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning” (van Manen, 2007, p. 38). The narrative produced by a phenomenological study is simultaneously “a reflexive re-living” of the experience for the study’s participants and a “reflective appropriation of something meaningful,” a text that powerfully affects the reader in his or her own lived experience (p. 36).

To study lived experience, we are charged with delving into the life world of our research subjects and interpretively portraying the many layers that make up their lives and choices. In the piece below dated 5/7/11, Keshet Bachan includes a description of a lived experience of her own to explain the fundamental nature of and importance of the study of lived experience:

And more often than not as a researcher in a large NGO I’m asked to generate these facts. I’m told that a quote is not evidence. That a story can add color, and ‘hey even policy makers at the World Bank are people, right?’ But it’s not proof. So I spend my time running after household surveys and school based questionnaires. And people, children, boys and girls, become ‘target groups’, and they stop being real. They are a number, a fact, a case.

And then I get an email, on Saturday morning, telling me one of our research subjects has had a terrible accident. She drowned in a river and her father couldn’t get there fast enough to save her. She was only five.

This girl had a voice. And she used it to tell us her story. It was a story of a loving family, struggling with poverty. It was a story of a small girl who couldn’t wait to start school and who loved playing with her friends by the river. And I

dare anyone to tell me her story is not evidence. And her words are not proof.
(<http://girlsreport.wordpress.com/2011/05/07/lived-experience>)

As we gather the direct accounts of personal experience *in the words of the people who lived through them*, we provide ourselves with ordinary words that will give rise to the extraordinary understanding we seek. Their memories lead to our understanding of the experience and its significance in their lives. “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (van Manen, 2007, p. 37). We gather examples of the phenomenon, define and name it, and by interpreting the experience, elicit meaning and significance.

Phenomenological studies allow us to "go very deeply into our experienced body of perception...into our "bodily felt sense" (Levin, 1985, p. 53) in a search for meaning. Such studies seek to uncover the felt sense of an experience, to enter the most open dimension of the experience such that we encounter the "preontological mode of vision," our "primordial attunement," our "*original openness to Being...experienced in its panoramic wholeness*" (emphasis in the original) (Levin, 1985, p. 53). Van Manen (2007) concurs with Dilthey when he writes, “In its most basic form lived experience involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness” (p. 35), what Merleau-Ponty (1968) calls “sensibility.” It is this pre-reflective consciousness that we are after, the thoughts we have before they are analyzed too much or molded by cultural norms.

Van Manen adds, “Through meditations, conversations, day dreams, inspirations and other interpretive acts we assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life” (2007, p. 37). This is done by experiencing a phenomenon repeatedly oneself or by searching for

common underlying themes in the text generated by participants who have experienced the phenomenon. In phenomenology, "One does not ascertain causes for particular effects, but simply establishes regularities" (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 4). That is, rather than compare one person's experience to another's, rather than try to match a cause with an effect, rather than try to explain *why* an experience is what it is, the goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to discover the underlying *essence* of the lived experience.

Discovery of the Essence

"Phenomenology is the study of essences" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005, p. vii). But, what is the essence of something? The essence is the broadest sense of the *experience* of something, its quintessential, fundamental nature, the core or heart of it, without which it would be some other experience. While in college, my friend Lisa and I shared babysitting duties for one of our professor's sons. When the boy was 18 months old, Lisa and I had the following exchange:

Lisa: Nicky's talking a lot more now.

Me: Yeah, I noticed that. He's got so many more words.

Lisa: Get this - the other day, I showed him one of his sneakers and said, "Hey, Nicky, what's this?" He looked at me like I was stupid, like he was saying, "Really? You don't know what that is?" and he said, "It is what it is. It is a shoe."

It is what it is. It is a shoe. Nicky had identified the essence of a shoe. He might have given the same answer had Lisa held up a hiking boot, a sandal, or a penny loafer. It is what it is. It is a shoe.

What, for example, is *your* essence, the essence of *you*? That is, what about *you* defines you as you and without which you would not be who you are? According to

Williams:

Your essence is what is truly you,
What cannot be taken away from you,
What you can never lose or change or destroy
Or get rid of.
The irreducible you.
You can change and transform your entire universe.
You cannot change your essence. (Williams, 1994, p. 62)

As Nicky might say, "You are what you are. You are you." But, what does that mean?

You are the quintessential you, the ever-present, unchanged core of you.

Phenomenology is the process of removing the layers covering an experience to get at the essence of the experience, of what it *is*, "without which it could not be what it is" (van Manen, 2007, p. 10). Merleau-Ponty (1962) adds that phenomenology seeks the fundamental nature, spirit, or essence of a thing, the instances or manifestations that make the thing what it is. The identification of the essence of something is part of what Heidegger means by "getting back to the things themselves" (1953/1996, p. 24).

Allow me to present one final example of the essence of something. I love the way Clint Black's song, "Something That We Do" tries to describe the essence of love. "What is love?" the song seems to be asking. Black's answer? It is the *expressions* of love that define love, just as it is the expression of any phenomenon that ultimately defines it:

Love is certain, love is kind
Love is yours and love is mine
But it isn't something that we find
It's something that we do
It's holding tight, lettin' go
It's flying high and laying low

Let your strongest feelings show
And your weakness, too
It's a little and a lot to ask
An endless and a welcome task
Love isn't something that we have
It's something that we do
(1997, <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/black-clint/something-that-we-do-4562.html>)

What strikes me about Black's definition of love is that it is so unexpected. I expected love to be defined the way words are typically defined in the dictionary, using a simple, universally agreed upon description. Instead, Black shows how love is best defined by the many ways *in which it is experienced and acted upon in the everyday lifeworld, and how it shows itself to us.*

As suggested above, phenomenological descriptions also are contextual. Therefore, in my description of the phenomenon of starting a school, I include the conditions under which I have uncovered it. "Just as the trip to the holiday home is part of the holiday [experience], the route toward the object is part of the object" (Descombes, as cited in Pinar et al., 1995, p. 454). The contextual details surrounding the experience of starting a school, then, should not be considered to be my point of view, but rather, collectively, an important part of the phenomenon itself.

Heidegger declares, "There is no such thing as *the one* phenomenology" (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 3). Van Manen adds, "There is no definitive set of research procedures [that] one can follow blindly" (2007, p. 34). Having said all that, phenomenology *does* provide a philosophy and methodology that uniquely allow us to explore the deeper meaning of a lived experience. Phenomenology, then, has an essence all its own. "The aim is to construct an animating, evocative description of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld...and at

making explicit and seeking universal meaning” (van Manen, 2007, p.19).

Phenomenology, therefore, provides us with a way to access and determine ontology. In fact, Heidegger asserts, "*Ontology is only possible as phenomenology*" (1972/ 1993a, p. 82).

The Subjective Nature of Experience

It is important to note that the philosophy underpinning phenomenology acknowledges the impossibility of objectivity. As Heidegger reminds us, everything we remember is inevitably subjective: “Truth is here driven back to the subjectivity of the human subject” (Heidegger, 1988/1993d, p. 124). It is impossible for us to be completely objective due to cultural influences and the passage of time. Cultural factors influence both what we remember and how we present those memories.

Short of designing a tool that will unearth exactly what a person was experiencing on any given day at any given time, I must rely on the personal accounts of participants to describe their experiences as they remember them. By asking those who have lived the experience of starting a school to recall that experience, I accept that, inevitably, participants will communicate tainted memories of what transpired and how they connect with that experience now. But, it is precisely those strongly felt remembrances I am seeking, not facts.

Phenomenology allows us to see a phenomenon as we recall it retrospectively, and as it is interpreted within the context of our lives today. Gadamer says, "We can only begin to understand from where we are now" (1960/1994, p. 278). That is, the meaning we ascribe to the phenomenon is a reflective grasping. What I am able to share from this study, then, are the unique understandings brought forward by the school founders who

have participated in the study. I do not intend to present a completely objective perspective on the phenomenon of the lived experience of starting a school. Rather, the focus is to bring forward, as an evocative telling, the subjective, *lived* sense of the experience.

My interpretation of the experience of starting a school presumably does not apply more broadly to the experience of school founders who did not participate in the study. Indeed, the ideal outcome of a phenomenological study is "to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness" (Gadamer, 1960/1994, pp. 4-5). Therefore, the individual experiences I study and my hermeneutic interpretation of them do not promise to present regularities or conclusions from which wider practical predictions can be made.

Hermeneutics and Interpretation

Phenomenology, guided by hermeneutics...specifies the layout of opportunities for deepening, enhancing, and expanding our perceptual life as an experience of Being. (Levin, 1985, p. 53)

Heidegger's *Being and Time* fused Dilthey's hermeneutics with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology to produce a new hybrid discipline: hermeneutical phenomenology, the very title of which would have had a heretical ring for Husserl. (Moran, 2000, p. 276)

What is hermeneutics, and what is its place in the practice of phenomenology?

The whole process of phenomenology is verbal, the result of conversations. The idea is not to attempt to "get inside another person and relive his experiences" (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 383), but rather, "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived expression into a textual, expression of its essence" (van Manen, 2007, p. 36). Heidegger writes, "It is language that tells us about the essence of a thing" (Heidegger, 1971/1993b,

p. 348). Gadamer adds, "Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs" (1960/1994, p. 389). The words of the school founders form the textual information used to come to an understanding of the experience of starting a school. But, how is this understanding reached from the thousands of words the school founders use to name the experience?

Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpreting and reflecting on the written or spoken expressions of those who have experienced the phenomenon under study. The aim in using hermeneutics to interpret the text collected is to try to grasp the essential meaning and essence of that experience (van Manen, 1989, 2007, p. 77). The word hermeneutics derives from the name of the Greek God Hermes, the God who brought messages from Zeus to ordinary mortals. "The aim is to understand an author as well [as] or even better than he or she understands himself or herself" (Schleiermacher, as cited in van Manen, 1989). Hermeneutics is "fundamentally a writing activity" (van Manen, 2007, p. 7) that allows us to describe the essence of the phenomenon we are studying by interpreting the text of those who have described their experiences.

My first experience with the practice of hermeneutics was in a doctoral level overview course on research methods during which everyone in the class was asked to write about an experience they had had eating an ice cream cone. We each dutifully wrote about our own experience, then read our descriptions aloud to one another. Subsequently, we examined the texts we had had written to search for common themes and to find the essence of the experience. By doing so, we were able to interpret, hermeneutically, the collective recollections of our classmates and the essence and meaning of the experience.

Gadamer says, "Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding...hermeneutics...is concerned with understanding texts" (1960/1994, p. 385). He goes on to say:

Texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life" that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. (p. 387)

The intent of this study is to understand what it is like to start a school by coming to understand what the school founders in the study *say* about the experience in their own words.

The Hermeneutic Process

What is to be done with the words shared by participants in this study? How is it possible to make sense of hundreds of pages of transcribed conversations in order to distill the essence of the experience of starting a school? As a partner in the conversation, the text communicates its meaning through me, thereby incorporating my own experiences with the participants'. As the researcher, I have interpreted the text in my own way in an attempt to understand it. Gadamer writes, "Understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing;" "*Understanding occurs in interpreting*" and "All understanding is interpretation" (1960/1994, pp. 388-389).

There are two perspectives from which any text is interpreted: the grammatical perspective and the psychological perspective. The grammatical perspective focuses on the actual words and language used. The psychological interpretation pertains to interpreting the words while taking into account the context and mindset of the author or speaker.

It is important to see both the forest and the trees here. That is, it is impossible to understand the parts of the text, such as individual words, without knowing the context surrounding them. If I mention a plant, it is important to know if I am referring to a manufacturing facility or a flower growing in soil. At the same time, it is impossible to understand the text without considering it as a whole. What is the overall meaning of the piece when the words are taken together? And how does an idea that comes from the initial interpretation (of the beginning of a conversation) affect the interpretation of later words? The continual reciprocity between whole and parts creates an unavoidable *hermeneutic circle* that cannot help but inform the interpretation of the text.

It is important, too, to acknowledge that we bring fore-knowledge to particular aspects of the text, and that this fore-knowledge evolves with each interpretation, thereby changing the nature of the fore-knowledge we bring to the next piece of text we read and interpret (Honderich, 2005, pp. 379-380). As we go back and forth between the words and the person who created them, it becomes clear that to understand a text requires a reiterative process. This takes time and has consequences. "Every reading puts us in a better position to understand since it increases our knowledge" (Honderich, 2005, p. 380). Just as two people can come to an understanding through conversation, such a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 388) can take place between an interpreter and a text. The ideal is for the interpreter to present an understanding that is not only the interpreter's or the author's, but common to both.

The first condition of hermeneutics begins when something strikes us or "addresses" us (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 299) in the textual data we have collected. "*Something* awakens our interest - that is really what comes first" (Gadamer, 2001, p.

50). What struck me immediately while interpreting descriptions of eating an ice cream cone was that people had consistently *not* shared the sorts of details *I had expected* them to. For example, I expected everyone to describe the flavor of ice cream they had eaten, as in "I had Swiss chocolate almond" and, "Mine was Vanilla." Instead, the most common element in our descriptions pertained to *whom we were with* while eating our ice cream cone. Jardine et al., explain my reaction: "Simply put, when paid attention to hermeneutically, seemingly simple, everyday events start to bristle with meaning and portend" (2006, p.149). Jardine et al., go on to say that, in contrast to the natural sciences, which strip away connections in an attempt to be purely objective, hermeneutic research deliberately *retains* the relations between things. This phenomenological inquiry into what we are actually seeing, complete with its surrounding context and nets of belonging, helps us more fully understand the essence of the experience.

Heidegger's and Gadamer's statements about the subjectivity of our memories can be applied also to the hermeneutic process. As I interpret the text of my study, my own experience inevitably enters into the analysis. I do not deliberately misinterpret the text or infuse it with my own personal point of view. Instead, I endeavor to put forward a possible interpretation of the text that melds my participants' words with my own interpretive renderings. As Jardine et al., describe it, "What I will witness is neither simply what I've seen before, nor is it simply new. It is, rather, a meeting *between* the new and the old" (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 150). Gadamer writes:

The interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. I

have described this above as a "fusion of horizons." We can now see that this is what takes place in conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common. (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 388)

Jardine introduces this hermeneutic complexity by comparing interpretation to the birth of his son (Jardine et al., 2006). While his newborn son is a distinct human being set apart from his father (not unlike the distinct body of text generated by a phenomenological study), the baby also is intricately woven into a family of relatives (a complex context) forever. The child cannot exist without his parents and, as such, is an individual, but an individual who is inextricably linked to others. His birth also changes the identities of those closest to him and changes the course of their lives forever. For example, Jardine becomes a father and his mother becomes a grandmother. Without the baby's birth, none of this would occur. Everything affects everything else with an endless ripple and feedback effect.

My interpretation of the lived experience of starting a school, therefore, constitutes a combination of what I have seen and learned in the past with what I have witnessed through the study and the text it generated, taking into account the context within which each school founder started his or her school. Despite the complexity suggested here, there are certain overarching dimensions that are part of any phenomenological text. These are called the existentials of an experience, and they consist of: lived space, lived body, lived time and lived relation. The next section addresses each of these existentials in greater depth.

The Lived Existentials of Meaning

The process of applying a hermeneutical analysis to a body of text generated around a phenomenon typically involves bringing forward the four existential dimensions

of the experience. At the most general level of human existence, these four “fundamental existential themes frequently pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their historical, cultural, or social situatedness” (van Manen, 2007, p. 101). To distinguish these overarching fundamental dimensions common to all experiences from the specific themes that arise from a particular phenomenon, the dimensions are called “existentials.” Van Manen maintains that these four fundamental existentials “may prove especially helpful as guides for reflection in the research process” (van Manen, 2007, p. 101). Below, I introduce the existentials in turn.

Lived Space (Spatiality)

Lived space (spatiality) is felt space or how the space in which we find ourselves is experienced. “We know that the space in which we find ourselves affects the way we feel” (van Manen, 2007, p. 102). We might feel claustrophobic in a stopped elevator or overwhelmed in a large, empty stadium, or free on the open sea. This is felt space. As these feelings are largely pre-verbal, and therefore feelings we do not typically reflect on, it can be difficult to describe our felt space in words. In the ice cream cone example, lived space showed itself in our descriptions of *where* we ate our ice cream cone – at a hot beach, at an ice cream shop, at home, etc.

Lived space is “a category for inquiring into the ways we experience the affairs of our day-to-day existence” (van Manen, 2007, p. 103). Consider the opening day of school for the school founders. Where were the school founders on that day and what did it feel like to be there? Where do they remember being - at home, in a car on the road, standing on a crowded train, walking down a hallway, in a certain classroom? What was

it like to walk into the school space or enter an active classroom on that first day of operation? This is the existential of felt space.

Although Kierkegaard and Heidegger emphasized the importance of *time* to human experience, and Descartes and Merleau-Ponty emphasized *space*, Casey posits that “the true ecstasy of human experience” is “*placial*,” for without *place*, “we would be confined to the immediate locus of an immobilized body,” which neglects the larger, inevitable context within which we exist (Casey, 1993, p. 111). So, while some regard time or space as primary in the order of being, Casey argues, “*In the order of knowing*, place comes first. It is “the first of all things” because we know it from the very beginning. But we know it thus only because our bodies have always already, i.e., a priori, given us access to it” (his emphasis) (Casey, 1993, p. 110). We always know where we are – we are here.

What sort of *place* is a “school?” Isn’t it first and foremost a *place*, a (brick) building, or some physical space where teachers and students come together to teach and learn? Unless the school is merely a collection of online classes (none of the schools I studied are), the school founder must provide a space within which teachers and students can engage with one another. In some cases, a school founder renovates and outfits an existing building for use as his school. In other cases he finds land and builds a new building. In any case, a certain amount of “building” takes place in the starting of a school. The school founder builds the school by shaping a physical space into the school he has envisioned. This space allows the school to exist in a place where none had existed before. But place means more than just a building, and as people work together in a school, other dimensions of place begin to announce themselves.

According to Casey, “an important part of getting back into place [where we can stabilize and ground ourselves] is having a place to get back into. Since we don’t have any such place by the mere fact of existing on earth, we must build places in which to reside” (Casey, 1993, p. 111). And even when we know our exact location in the world, we can still be lost. When we are lost, we lack both stability and inhabitancy, which Casey describes as, “a sure sense of where *our own place* is” (his emphasis) (1993, p. 109). Place is where we dwell. It is where we find ourselves. It is where we are stable and grounded. “When we cannot find a habitable place, we must set about making or building such a place to ensure stable inhabitation” (Idem.). Likewise, when a school founder cannot find a “habitable” school for himself or his children, he sets out to make or build one in an attempt to provide stability for the teachers and students who will inhabit the space he creates. Casey adds, “Such building ultimately means constructing places in which we are able to *dwell*” (1993, p. 112).

This connection between physical space and existence is well-accepted. There’s an old adage, “Wherever you go, there you are.” Heidegger also writes about this connection between our existence and the spaces within which we *dwell*. In *Being and Time*, he refers to the essence of our existence (our being in the world) as dwelling. “To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (Heidegger, 1951/1993b, p. 349). Heidegger adds that our dwelling places are not necessarily a lodging place or a house, but rather, simply a *space* in which human dwelling occurs (Heidegger, 1951/1993b, pp. 347-348). Casey adds that our dwelling places may not be only places where we dwell, but places that “offer not just bare shelter but the possibility of sojourns of upbringing, of education, of contemplation” (Casey, 1993, p. 112).

Heidegger further explores this connection between *being* and *building*. The Latin *fui* (I have been), and the Greek *phuō* (I come to light) give rise to the English word *be*, and the German words *bin* (as in *ich bin*, meaning I am) and *bauen* (to build) (1951/1993b, pp. 345, 349). “*Bauen* in its origins reflects *phuein*, the coming to light of things that grow in time from the earth skyward” (1993b, p. 345). The word *bauen* also means to cherish, protect, and care for. So, just as babies and seedlings with proper care grow skyward to become adult humans and tall trees, so do school buildings grow skyward into dwelling places for teachers and students, with the protection and care of the school founders who built them and the occupants who dwell within. Casey describes every building as a “compromise formation: a middle ground between nature and culture” (1993, p. 112).

Building or no building, walls or no walls, we still exist as beings partly because we take up space somewhere. What ultimately matters, however, is not so much the space we occupy, but what we *do* in that space. To understand the experience of starting a school, then, it is important to explore both the nature of the lived space the school founders occupy, and the activities that take place there.

Lived Body (Corporeality)

The second existential, lived body or corporeality, arises from our memories of *what our bodies feel* during an experience. As humans, we are merely bodies, after all. My science training has helped me to understand this very well. It has taught me that everything we think and do is embodied or bodily. As Merleau-Ponty says, “We are our body” (1962/2005, p. 239). Indeed, we are nothing *but* our body. Every thought we have is, at the core, merely the firing of neurons through our brain in a particular coded

pattern, a pattern of neuronal firings formed and retrieved precisely by repetition and the accumulation of life experiences.

We are our body. Our bodies consist of a jumble of protons, neutrons, and electrons formed into atoms that combine to form molecules that combine to form neurons, skin, bones, blood, blood vessels, tissues and organs. Some of our bodily functions, such as the beating of our hearts, happen without our agency or awareness. Other bodily functions are responses to the environment in the form of communication patterns between the millions of neurons that interact in complex webs throughout our bodies.

Every time our senses are activated or we take action - when we see a child running on a playground, hear a teacher talking, brush away a fly, taste our lunch – our bodies are responding to the environment. The body's response is encoded and recorded physically in our neurons. "Every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 239). Every thought, action and reaction, therefore, is brought to us by and through our bodies. Every memory is a stored pattern of neurons firing in a particular order to retrieve an experience - a sight, a sound, a feeling. Stepping back for a moment, it is not hard to see how our body is our "very means of entering into relation with all things" (Abram, 1996, p. 47).

What does this experience of starting a school feel like in the hearts, muscles, bones, brains, and skin of participants? How does the experience come to reside corporeally in those who experience it? With this research, I have attempted to uncover these "stored" feelings, not just participants' thoughts and opinions about starting a school. I sought to uncover the *feelings* that arose from their thoughts, feelings

significant enough to be retrievable as memories months or years later. Heidegger suggests that our bodies and everything our bodies experience are inextricably linked at the core of our Being:

Ultimately, we dare not split up the matter in such a way, as though there were a bodily state housed in the basement with feelings dwelling upstairs. Feeling, as feeling oneself to be, is precisely the way we are bodily. Bodily being does not mean that the soul is burdened by a hulk we call the body...We do not 'have' a body; rather, we 'are' bodily. (Heidegger, 1961/1979, pp. 98-99)

Heidegger points out that a deep understanding of an experience begins with our ability to *feel* it, using our senses. It is through these pure and original sensations (seeing, hearing, etc.) that we generate an understanding of something that allows us to build our own truths about the world (Heidegger, 1972/1993a).

Lived Time (Temporality)

The third existential, lived time, is subjective time, not clock time. It is the time that flies when we are having fun and that slows down when we are bored. It is also what defines a person's temporal landscape. Along with our bodies, time is, in fact, all we have in life. At a fundamental level, time defines our lives and us.

Van Manen writes, "The temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal landscape" (2007, p. 104). In other words, a person may be young and looking forward to a long life, or old and looking back on a life well-lived. The experience we have and the things we sense over time either become part of us or fall away as forgotten memories that, while gone, nevertheless leave a bodily imprint on us. Our experiences over time then accumulate to define us:

The way I carry myself (hopeful or confident, defeated or worn-out), the gestures I have adopted and made my own

(from my mother, father, teacher, friend), the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past (family, school, ethnicity), and so forth. (van Manen, 2007, p. 104)

In the ice cream cone study, temporality or lived time showed itself in a variety of ways. It was the time period when the experience took place in an individual's temporal landscape, "The summer I was 11;" or the pace of the experience, "The ice cream melted so quickly, I had to lick around and around the cone as fast as I could;" or its length - the entire amount of perceived time the experience lasted.

In my study of the lived experience of starting a school, I am looking for the aspects of lived time as essential or common features of the experience. From what personal temporal perspective do school founders approach their task of starting a school? How does time progress as they work through the process? What other aspects of lived time define the essence of the experience? What are the connections between past, present and future in the way the phenomenon is experienced?

Lived Relation (Relationality)

Lived relation, the fourth existential, is "the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (van Manen, 2007, p. 104). It is the connection to others and the lived human relationships that define the experience. Because humans are social animals, it makes sense that lived relation might be a fundamental element that pervades the lifeworlds of all human beings and therefore arises as a common aspect of every human experience. Indeed, van Manen contends, "In a larger existential sense human beings have searched in this experience of the other, the communal, for a sense of purpose in life" (p. 105). He adds that our relation to others is corporeal – we meet with a handshake and a pat on the back, or we form our first

impression or definition of a person based on the physical body we see in front of us, or in the case of the guy we have come to know only by email, based on the body we would expect to see if we ever came face to face with him. Would he be tall? Blonde? Have a great smile?

In my study of the lived experience of starting a school, there are multiple lived relations to explore as school founders typically work with a wide variety of stakeholders. They interact with like-minded partners, funders, advisors, collaborators, real estate agents or developers, suppliers, potential teachers, students and parents, school system or government officials, and so on. Each of these lived relations has the potential to be a part of the essence of the experience.

No Last Word

Hermeneutic inquiry does not claim to have the last word on any subject (Gadamer, 1960/1997, p. 579). We do not yet know what our subject might twist itself into in the future, so it is impossible to describe any “thing” once and for all time (Jardine et al., 2006). Every experience is fluid in nature, tied to its past and present and changing as time unfolds around it. There is an old adage that says you cannot put your foot into the *same* river twice. In describing the river, one would have to describe it before, during, and after putting a foot in it. As new water, a different river, rushes by, the foot also disturbs the flow and changes the chemistry of the water.

Likewise, the experience of starting a school is fluid in nature. The experience is informed by the formation of every school in the past, and could be quite different in the future as every new school that opens serves to change the landscape and therefore the experience for future school founders. As such, hermeneutic phenomenology does not

attempt to summarize multiple experiences once and for all time, but acknowledges the past, present and future of a phenomenon. My research, therefore, attempts only to describe the specific experiences of my participants, the idea being "to playfully explore what understandings [these instances make] possible" (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 158).

Hermeneutics is not magic. It is possible to do it well only if participants' descriptions of their experience are rich and deep. The text gathered serves to capture the lived experience as a tangible artifact we can then interpret. The meaning of the text emanates from "an embodied and concrete here-and-now" stripped of the "taken-for-granted" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 454). Keeping in mind that meaning or truth tends to hide (van Manen, 1989), I have worked diligently to bring the deeper lived experience of starting a school to a level of awareness that allows for hermeneutic interpretation.

What is it like to live through the process of starting a school? What aspects of the journey define its essence? What *is* the essence of the experience? What does each stage of the experience feel like? Answers and meaning cannot be tallied, and they do not jump from the lips of participants or from the pages of a transcribed text. Answers and meaning are only possible by reviewing the text repeatedly and by writing and re-writing to uncover them.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Methodology

"The first task of the phenomenologist, Bachelard (1994) writes, "is to find the original shell" (p. 4). How does one accomplish this? Though he admits to being a bit prescribed and artificial in doing so, van Manen offers the novice human science researcher six reasonable suggestions to guide the hermeneutic analysis of a phenomenon of interest. He also offers advice on "working the text," including tips on how to

interpret text thematically, analytically, exemplificatively, and existentially (van Manen, 2007, pp. 167-173). As I continue with this study, I use van Manen's methodical structure of human science research (van Manen, 2007, pp. 30-31) and its six guiding principles, as a framework.

Turning to the Phenomenon

The first recommendation van Manen makes is that the fundamental question being asked must lead the researcher to a phenomenon that seriously interests him and that commits him to the world. Van Manen contends that we must have a concern in which we find ourselves deeply interested "(inter-esse, to be or stand in the midst of something)" (van Manen, 2007, p. 43). The topic must matter so deeply to us that we are willing to return repeatedly to the experience in order to thoughtfully render an interpretation of the experience as a thinker, researcher and theorist. Van Manen questions: "Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature?" (van Manen, 2007, p. 43). This line of inquiry requires great persistence, and this level of persistence requires a deep and genuine interest in the topic under study.

During the research process, the research question becomes a part of the researcher, a project the researcher gives himself over to within the context of his particular life circumstances at the time. The project is not separate from the researcher, but a part of him. "Phenomenological research does not start or proceed in a disembodied fashion" (2007, p. 31). Hence, the resulting phenomenological description is *one* researcher's interpretation of the experience, a single interpretation that might be

joined in the future by complementary or even richer descriptions gleaned by other researchers.

I have never started a school, but have been drawn to this phenomenon by my dissatisfaction with schooling as I have experienced it and studied it. I have long wondered what the experience would be like. What are the most positive and most negative aspects of the experience? Do I have "what it takes" to start a school? What can I learn from those who have gone before about what to expect? Now that new schools are being opened in the U.S. at the fastest pace in history, I believe it will be useful to more fully understand the essential elements of the experience and how school founders experience those elements at the most basic, human level.

Focus on The Lived Experience

The lived experience is a phenomenon one lives through and can reflect upon later. In phenomenological research, we seek to explicate phenomena as they present themselves to our consciousness. Each experience has spatial, temporal, corporeal, and relational aspects, all of which may be explored in an attempt to accomplish the most thoughtful rendering of the lived experience.

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, an experience is investigated as it is *lived* rather than as we intellectualize it. Hence, it is important to focus on the basic lived experience as participants describe it, without misinterpreting their words or subjectively evaluating their experience. Thus, the challenge with phenomenological inquiry is “not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (van Manen, 2007, p. 46). We must not let our preconceptions and assumptions predispose us to understanding the phenomenon in a predefined way.

Instead, the researcher must endeavor to turn “to the things themselves” (van Manen, 2007, p. 31), wherein the lived experience involves an “immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life” (Dilthey 1985), or an awareness of which we are unaware. The lived experience, which is the reality for us as human beings, guides us from theoretical abstractions to actual lived experience and how they affect our learning and our lives.

“The data of human science research are human experiences” (van Manen, 2007, p. 63). As such, the phenomenologist obtains experiential descriptions of the phenomenon from those who have experienced it; in this case, school founders. Sometimes descriptions exist already as an autobiography, biography or story in the classical literature. But, they also may be obtained by asking people to write about an experience or, if someone is experiencing the phenomenon currently, in the form of a diary, journal or log. Participants are engaged in conversation about the experience as well, after which conversations are transcribed to form an interpretable text. Another way to obtain experiential material is to closely observe people who are experiencing the phenomenon under study. This is tricky, however, because it “requires that one be a participant and an observer at the same time” (van Manen, 2007, p. 69). The researcher must be able to maintain a certain reflectivity in his or her interpretation while warding off the unwanted influence of manipulative, artificial, or social attitudes.

Reflecting on Themes

Van Manen’s third recommendation is that the researcher reflect on the essential themes that differentiate the phenomenon from all others. This does not suggest that a researcher collect and report the facts of the experience. “Rather, a true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that

particular experience in its special significance” and “consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure” (van Manen, 2007, p. 32).

To determine what it is that constitutes the basic nature of the experience, one must distinguish between appearance and essence. Themes that describe the experience are not necessarily the themes that ground the experience. Some themes are incidental or historically or culturally shaped, while others are “universal” in the sense that they are essential to the phenomenon or experience (van Manen, 2007, p. 106). *“In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is”* (van Manen, 2007, p. 107, his emphasis). If we imagine deleting a particular theme from our interpretation of the phenomenon, and then ask the question, “Is the phenomenon still the same without this aspect?” it becomes clear whether the theme is essential to an understanding of the phenomenon. Differentiating between incidental and essential themes is, according to van Manen, “the most difficult and controversial element of phenomenological human science” (2007, p. 106). Likewise, van Manen does not claim that an essential theme will be generalizable to a larger population, but simply that it arose from within the experiences of the particular group of people under study. As such, it is particular to them, and not necessarily applicable to all of humankind.

The Art of Writing and Rewriting

Van Manen writes, “For the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself” (2007, p. 125). The phenomenologist describes the phenomenon under study

through the art of writing and rewriting. Van Manen says, “Phenomenology is the application of *logos* (language and thoughtfulness) to a phenomenon (an aspect of lived experience), to what shows itself precisely as it shows itself” (2007, p. 33) and “Human science research *is* a form of writing” (p. 111).

Indeed, language is at the heart of this process, from the first verbal or written descriptions of the lived experience to the later presentation of essential themes and their significance. The overall goal of the process, after all, is to create an evocative phenomenological rendering of the text.

To
write
is to
write
is to
write
is to
write
is
to write is to write is
to write is to write
(Stein, as cited in Pinar & Irwin, 2005, p. 416)

Stein's poem above, written in the shape of a lit candle, nicely illuminates the multiple rounds of writing and re-writing that are part of the hermeneutic process. By writing and re-writing, the researcher is able to shed light on the topic and bring to light meanings and understandings previously hidden in the dark. “Phenomenological text succeeds when it lets us see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself” (van Manen, 2007, p. 130). By uncovering or “unhiding” the essential aspects of the experience (Heidegger, 1988/2002), this thoughtful, reiterative writing practice supports the hermeneutical process in its objective of seeking the truth.

Writing and re-writing help us clarify our thoughts. Van Manen writes, "Writing fixes our thoughts on paper" (2007, p. 125), effectively making external what was once internal. In *Analyzing Phenomenological Descriptions*, Barritt et al. (1984) suggest we can learn about the adequacy or inadequacy of our thoughts only by writing them. If we do not struggle with our writing in order to be clear (or, as they say, *honest*), "then there is likely to be little benefit to the scientific community and no benefit to the community at large in the results" (p. 16). Hence, we must write and re-write to bring forward our ideas in as clear and honest a manner as possible.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation

In order not to get side-tracked by speculations, superficialities, preconceived notions, rigid concepts or abstract theories, it is crucial for the phenomenological researcher to "[maintain] a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon" (van Manen, 2003, pp. 31 and 33). Van Manen warns that it is easy to stray, particularly when doing this type of qualitative research:

Unless the researcher remains strong in his or her orientation to the fundamental question or notion, there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back onto taxonomic concepts or abstracting theories. (van Manen, 2007, p. 33)

To avoid falling into these traps, the researcher must approach a question with a sincere interest rather than a "scientific disinterestedness," and remain engaged by the topic "in a full and human sense" (van Manen, 2007, p. 33). That is to say, the research must not tend to abstraction to the point at which it loses touch with the real world. Instead, our research must be connected to the ordinary lifeworld in a more practical way.

Van Manen suggests that “If we think of phenomenology as a kind of action oriented research, then an intimacy between research and life immediately suggests itself. Phenomenological human science is not external, top-down, expert, contract research. It is done *by* rather than *for* the people” (van Manen, 2007, p. 156). In the end, we must not settle for less than the deepest, most possible and most meaningful description of the essence of the life experience under study. Only knowledge of this quality, arising from a study well done, has the possibility of being useful to future readers.

Considering Parts and Whole

Van Manen’s last suggestion is that the study be structured to balance the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 2007, pp. 30-31). What van Manen means here is that the design of the study and the written "product" that results should have an appropriate balance of forest and trees. The design of each aspect of the study should be aligned with, and support, the larger structure of the study, and the significance of each essential aspect of the experience should be reflected appropriately in the final written piece. The question being explored should be manageable, well-defined and well-focused, so as to avoid becoming “quickly lost in the sheer expanse and depth of one’s question” (van Manen, 2007, p.167). And an aspect of the experience that turns out to be relatively minor should not consume more than its appropriate share of the final written text.

Van Manen warns that "it is easy to get [lost] in [the] writing" (2007, p. 33). As such, it is important to step back from time to time to remind myself of the research question, **What is the lived experience of starting a school?** I must consider the context within which those experiences have taken place (and within which they are later

interpreted), and to look beyond the pieces of the text generated by the study in order to see the greater whole. Van Manen suggests asking and answering the following questions at this stage in the writing process:

Is the study properly grounded in a laying open of the question? Are the current forms of knowledge examined for what they may contribute to the question? Has it been shown how some of these knowledge forms (theories, concepts) are glosses that overlay our understanding of the phenomenon? (van Manen, 2007, p. 34)

I kept these questions and guidelines in mind as I designed my study of the lived experience of starting a school.

The Process of Engagement

The process of engagement with the phenomenon begins with selecting appropriate participants, so I selected school founders who were willing to share their experience of starting a school with me. Next was the process of having conversations with participants and asking them to write about their experience. Finally, the text generated was thematized and reflected upon to find deeper meanings lurking within.

Selection of Participants

In order to gather text on the lived experience of starting a school, I conducted in-person conversations with four individuals who started their own schools. Participants were selected based on their willingness to talk to me about their experiences, their accessibility (I did not have funding to fly to distant cities), and the number of years since the school opened (the younger the school, the better). Individuals were selected based on what they might add to the diversity of the group in terms of gender; the type, size, and location of their school; and the number of years since the school opened. The participants selected for this study are not a statistical “sample,” but a diverse group of

individuals who have opened distinctly different schools. I did not include anyone who attempted to start a school but did not succeed, as theirs would be an entirely different experience. None of the school founders who participated in this research was required to do so, and all were free to leave it at any time. A fifth participant did drop out of the study after our first conversation. Participation was strictly voluntary and at-will in order to encourage a deep commitment to the work and a free flow of stories and text.

The individuals who participated in the study are described below with respect to the nature of their school and their experience. Additional details about them can be found in Chapter 4. In brief, Todd started a future-oriented all-purpose private school; Joe started a public Science and Technology school-within-a-school; Mary started a church-based religious school; and Fred started a charter boarding school. All names have been changed.

Todd is the founder of a private school that serves children in grades 4-12. I found Todd about a year before his school opened its doors when I read an article in a major national newspaper about his philosophy on education and his efforts to start his own school. I got in touch with Todd after reading the article, and have followed the progress of the school ever since. His goal was to build a research-based, cutting edge secondary school fit for the 21st century. The school was finishing its third year of operation at the beginning of the study and had nearly tripled in size since its first semester of operation.

Joe is the founder of a science and math-focused school within a school. I learned about this school from my employer when we decided to provide the funding for the establishment of the school. We approached a public school system, proposed the

idea of funding a math and science focused school, and then hired Joe to create and operate it. The school admits highly capable math and science students in grades 9-12 through an intensely competitive application process. The 250 students attend the school on Mondays and Wednesdays as freshmen and sophomores and Tuesdays and Thursdays as juniors and seniors, just for their math and science classes. They take all of their other classes and participate in extracurricular activities at their “home” high school. The school is part of a larger public school system.

Mary is the founder of a small Christian school that serves children from preschool through 8th grade. The school is attached to a church in a majority minority neighborhood. All of the school’s students are non-white. I found this school through a fellow graduate student whose daughter is a preschooler there.

Fred and I were college classmates. Upon graduation, Fred started a public charter school in a major city. The school is now in its 14th year of operation and serves over 300 children in grades 6-12. Students live at the school during the week and return to their homes on weekends. The school’s mission is to take children from high-poverty urban areas and prepare them for college. Although greater than 80% of their parents did not attend college, 96% of the school’s graduates so far have gone on to college.

At a certain point in the analysis of the transcripts produced by the study, it became clear that all four participants selected were motivated to start schools after they could not find the type of school they were seeking within the educational landscape surrounding them. This motive was not a criterion for participation in the study, and I was not consciously aware of it when I agreed to allow them to participate in the study. Certainly, there are other motivations to start a school, such as earning a profit or

extending one's power. It is also possible that, in a subconscious "similar-to-me" way, a certain type of school founder was drawn to me and I to him. If this occurred, it was purely unintentional as well as unavoidable given how little I knew about the school founders when we began our conversations together.

A Theory of Engagement

Engaging in conversation with participants to generate a text describing their experience was a critical and visible step in the research process. Heidegger suggests that *logos* should precede any text. The basic meaning of *logos* is speech, in the sense that speech makes manifest whatever is being thought about and discussed. Speech is therefore a form of communication and expression that lets things be seen (Heidegger, 1993a).

Gadamer writes, "Understanding is the understanding of expression" (1960/1994, p. 212). With this study, I have attempted to come to understand the lived experience of starting a school by hermeneutically analyzing what was communicated about it. My understanding of the phenomenon arose from the things school founders *said*, initially orally, then also in written form. The words they used, the examples they gave, the stories they chose to share were all important. As Gadamer puts it, expression brings forward the ideas otherwise housed inside us and makes those ideas immediately present (1960/1994). The expression of these ideas, memories, and stories formed the text or "data" for the study.

It was my goal to elicit from participants the words that described their actual lived experience as completely as possible. I had to depend on them to come forward with the words that would be useful in the meaning-making phase of the research. "The

'being true' of logos...means to take beings that are being talked about...out of their concealment; to let them be seen as something unconcealed" (Heidegger, 1927/1993a, p. 79). It is by this method that I have endeavored to uncover the words that generated meaning around the experience of starting a school.

Conversations

My primary engagement with each participant in this study was through in-person conversations. I had four hour-long conversations with Todd and three with each of the other participants. While I also asked participants to write about their experience, I asked them to speak about them more, because of the richness of expression such back-and-forth conversations are able to reveal, and because most people find speaking less difficult than writing. "[People] will talk with much more ease and eloquence and with much less reserve" (van Manen, 2007, p. 64). Having participants talk about their experience also had the advantage of preventing over-editing, and revealed important nonverbal information such as tone. Through my conversations with participants, I collected stories to describe the experience of starting a school as the experience was lived, not as school founders conceptualized or analyzed it.

Conversations, in the hermeneutic phenomenological human science sense, are not the same as traditional interviews. The purpose of a conversation is to gather an appropriate narrative that, when analyzed hermeneutically, will allow the development of a "richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (van Manen, 2007, p. 66). The conversational prompts used, therefore, were open-ended, but sharply focused on getting at the experience *as it was lived*. So, while a traditional interview question such as, "When did you open your school and how many students and faculty did it have?" might

generate facts about the school, a conversational question might be, “How did the idea of starting a school first arise for you?” or, “How did you decide to start a school?” The number of, and wording of, questions in each conversation were not finite and pre-determined as they might be in an interview. As van Manen says, “Naturally, it is impossible to offer ready-made questions” (van Manen, 2007, p. 67). Follow-up questions in a conversation flowed naturally from answers to initial questions. In an interview, a dominant party typically marches through a list of pre-conceived questions in order, and a non-dominant party answers them. In a conversation, there is more of a two-way discourse, with both parties attempting to generate useful information together.

Van Manen (2007) suggests that when two people engage in a conversation about a topic of mutual interest, the speakers become animated by the topic to which they are both oriented, and the conversation becomes a triad consisting of two speakers and the “notion or phenomenon that keeps the personal relation of the conversation intact” (p. 98). Gadamer (1975) adds that the topic itself is in a sense asking questions of the speakers, who answer the questions as they make sense of the topic through their conversational relationship. “The collaborative quality of the conversation lends itself especially well to the task of reflecting on the themes of the notion or phenomenon under study” (van Manen, 2007, p. 98).

Before our first conversation, I sent each potential participant a formal letter of invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix A). A positive response resulted in the forwarding of consent forms (Appendix B), and the scheduling of a date for a first meeting. At the first meeting, I collected signed consent forms, gave the participant a

writing prompt to complete after the conversation, and had the first 60-minute conversation with the participant.

The writing prompt asked participants, “Tell me everything you can remember about the most significant aspect of your experience of starting a school or about one incident that occurred in the process. What about this experience sticks with you most? Tell me how you were feeling at the time, from the inside out: your mood(s), emotions, etc.” The writing prompt included the following advice, courtesy of van Manen (2007): Describe a specific event, incident, or example of the experience as you lived through it. Try to avoid causal explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations and instead describe the experience from inside yourself: the feelings, the mood, the emotions, etc. Describe how your body felt, how things smelled, the sounds you remember, etc. Avoid beautifying the account with fancy phrases or terminology.

All conversations took place at mutually convenient times and places and were audiotaped. Conversations were guided by prompts designed to stir participants’ thinking and to tap into their experience as they planned for and opened their schools. Between conversations, I forwarded a transcript of each prior conversation to the participant for his or her review. In this way, s/he could make any necessary corrections to the transcript, and would remember what topics were already covered before our next conversation.

Conversation prompts included: What drew you to start a school? What was it like for you to begin this journey? What stands out as one of the most memorable experiences of your experience? What aspect of the experience had the greatest impact on you? Tell me about the highest and lowest moments of the experience for you. What

aspects of your experience would you expect other school founders to experience as they start their own schools?

I was as careful as possible not to put words into participants' mouths or be overly directive with prompts. I assured participants I was not seeking *perfect* memories, but rather *their* personal memories of the experience. I adjusted follow-up prompts and questions for subsequent conversations according to each person and each story, consistent with van Manen's advice that, "A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project" (van Manen, 2007, p. 162).

I asked participants to respond to follow-up questions prompted by our conversations, during the conversation itself, during the next conversation, or by email. Questions arose during conversations, during the transcription of the audiotapes, and during my review of the resulting text. I returned to each participant in person, by phone, and by email as many times as necessary until I was satisfied I had the most complete and detailed text possible.

In order to understand the context of each individual's experience, I asked for certain basic information about the experience if it did not naturally come up. For example, how old the school founder was when s/he started "building" his/her school, how old s/he was when it opened, who else was involved, and what else was going on in the world and the founder's life at the time. My point in asking for this information was not to compile a checklist of steps or data or items accomplished by the school founder, but rather to have a wider picture of the context within which their experience took place.

Identifying and Reflecting on Themes

Once the text was “complete,” the hermeneutic process began. From the text generated by my communications with the school founders, I identified and reflected upon the essential themes that characterized the phenomenon. By really *hearing*, not just listening to, the participants, and by repeatedly reviewing the discourse “data” collected through our oral and written conversations, I have written my way to an understanding of the essence of the experience of starting a school. “The connection of discourse with understanding and intelligibility becomes clear through an existential possibility which belongs to discourse itself, hearing...Listening to...is the existential being-open of Dasein” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 153).

My goal with this study was to read and re-read the text to find the “possibilities of understanding that it evokes” (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 158). As part of the rendering of the phenomenon, I looked for patterns and essences in the text that captured aspects of the experience that seem familiar to participants, and that bear a “family resemblance” to one another (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 158). These themes were presented to participants for their reaction and comment and then formed the basis of Chapter 4.

I used the thematizing method laid out by van Manen (2007) and the interpretive method laid out by Barritt et al. (1984) to uncover themes from the text of my conversations. Van Manen (2007) suggests several approaches to isolating thematic statements from a text: the holistic approach, the selective approach and the line-by-line approach. The holistic or sententious approach consists of formulating a phrase that captures “the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole” (p. 93). The selective or highlighting approach consists of identifying and highlighting statements

or phrases that seem “particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience” (p. 93). The line-by-line or detailed approach suggests looking at every single sentence and asking what the sentence reveals about the phenomenon. In the end, the first two approaches worked well, but not the line-by-line approach.

The Path Forward

As Van Manen (2007) points out, there is a direct link between our understanding of human experience and our ability to provide educational care in the lifeworld of students. While he laments the “tendency to abstraction” by “university-based theorists who have lost touch with the real world of children” (pp. 138-139), he asserts that “re-instating lived experience as a valid basis for practical action” (p. 155) can bridge the gap between knowledge and deed. With this larger purpose in mind, I was eager to find out what the school founders would tell me, what parts of their journeys would turn out to be the most elucidating or the most essential, and what we might discover together that none of us knew before our exploration together began.

CHAPTER 4

MINDING THE GAP

Though the participants in this study are diverse in many ways, one thing they have in common is their openness and willingness to come forward with their stories. During hours of conversation, they allowed me to probe deeply into their experiences in order to paint a picture of what it is like to start a school. While this chapter shows each of their experiences in its uniqueness, it also highlights common themes that present themselves, with the effect that each participant and each theme contributes in its own way to the essence of the experience.

Recall that the essence of an experience is composed of the features of the experience without which it would be some other experience. You cannot be “A singer without a voice” or have “A day without an hour” or “A pen without ink” (Bernstein, 2012, online). A voice is part of the essence of a singer, an hour is part of every day, and every pen, by definition, has ink. These essences are universally understood. In the same way, we cannot have:

A commercial with no pitch.
A lover without a love.
A touch without a hand.
A sting without a bite.
A plane without wings.
A murder without a victim.
A craving without a desire.
A comic without a joke.
Stealing with nothing stolen.
The two without the one.
A cure without a disease.
Compliance without criteria.
A disappointment without an expectation.
(Excerpted from Bernstein, 2012)

Notice how each line of the above poem is designated as a complete sentence, in a sense encapsulating a single idea within a web of unity. In the same way, the individual experiences of school founders uncovered through this work retain their own unique elements and internal meaning while, at the same time, contributing to the essence of the larger experience by revealing pieces of the common themes. By highlighting commonalities among these individual experiences without erasing their unique embodiments, I endeavor to identify the essence of the experience of starting a school.

What are the essential elements of the experience of starting a school without which the experience would be something else? This question provides the initial focus for this chapter, followed by interpretive renderings that arise from the answers. What follows, then, is an attempt to show the possible experience of starting a school as it was lived by the school founders who agreed to share their experiences with me. Where relevant, published reflections from other school founders have been included as well. At times, literary sources such as fiction, poetry, or song lyrics, are offered to reveal how each element of the experience might reside within the larger context of our human experience, and to help the reader "feel" the experience more powerfully.

“These writings do not yield absolute truths, or objective observation. The writer at best gains an occasional glimpse of the meaning of human existence” (van Manen, 2002, p. 7). In phenomenology, the interpretation of themes is never complete, subjectively defined, or closed to the reader. As Bachelard recommends, we should “leave the ambivalences...a poet will always be more suggestive than a philosopher” (1994, p. 53). This “leav[ing] the ambivalences” allows the reader to unwrap each

archetype, using his or her own knowledge and experience to inform the interpretation in a way that is personally meaningful.

There is no one description or interpretation of the experience of starting a school. Instead, what I unpack here are the essential aspects of the experience *that showed themselves in the text of my conversations and during my engagement with the school founders*. The descriptive accounts given here offer *possible* interpretations of the experience, but not *the only* interpretation. Van Manen writes that we “must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in such a way that we recognize this description as a possible experience, which means as a possible interpretation of that experience” (1997, p. 41).

Who are these participants who agreed to talk with me? How did they make the decision to start a school? What was it like for them to open new schools? In the following section, I offer a brief introduction of each school founder to open the context for the starting point of the phenomenon. All proper names in the text below are pseudonyms, including people, school names, and places, unless they draw from published texts.

Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place

At a critical point before deciding to start a school, all four school founders described themselves as caught between a proverbial rock and a hard place, between various educational options that were not right for them, their children, or other children. While suspended between unacceptable options, each tried to decide whether the rock or the hard place might be the lesser of two evils, the choice with which they could live.

Although the details of each person's situation were different, none of them were able to make an easy choice. This inability to embrace an existing educational option, coupled with their knowledge and creative ideas about education, their willingness to dare, and their intense desire to develop children ultimately propelled them to start their own schools. It is within this context that I introduce the four participants in this study, along with his or her unique story.

Todd: A Model of Success?

Todd is the Founder of 21st Century Academy (“Century”), a private school that serves children in grades 6-12. I first “met” Todd a year before Century opened when I came across an article in a major national newspaper about his philosophy on education and his intention to start a school. I got in touch with him, met him in person, and have followed the progress of his school ever since. The school is now in its fifth year of operation, and has grown from 9 students to 66.

Todd’s goal was to build a cutting-edge secondary school fit for the 21st century (“built for their future, not our past”) using the latest educational research as a guide. Using the research on teenage biorhythms (<http://www.startschoollater.net/research--info.html>), for example, Todd decided that classes would begin at 9:30, and students are encouraged to eat, drink, and take breaks whenever they need to. Based on the homework research, the school's policy is that the only homework is to read – anything – for 30 minutes or more every night. The school has an individualized, interdisciplinary curriculum. There is no traditional Science Department, English department, or “Trigonometry” class. Todd chose his curriculum and teaching methods using

recommendations from groups such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills which states in its materials:

In the United States, we tell students the same thing a hundred times. On the 101st time, we ask them if they remember what we told them the first hundred times. However, in the 21st century, the true test of rigor is for students to be able to look at material they've never seen before and know what to do with it.

—Ken Kay, President of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (Bellanaca & Brandt, 2010, p. xxiii)

As a child, Todd was a good student, and the public schools he attended were “in their heyday,” considered by many to be some of the best public schools in the country, he says. He attended an Ivy League college and did very well there, which prompted his advisors to suggest he pursue law school, since “that is what was expected of people who did well in college.” He went to Stanford Law School. “I was a success story,” he says; “I [was] the model of what is supposed to be.” His parents’ friends were envious: “Your son...best thing in the world!” they’d say.

Reflecting on his education, Todd says: “I didn’t think much about my educational experience while I was going through it, but in retrospect I realized how harmful it was and how damaging it was.” He adds, “I happen to believe that education is responsible for every dysfunctional pathology you see in adults today.” While Todd did not elaborate on these claims, he insinuates that his schooling somehow set him up for adult disappointments. Judith Shapiro, President of Barnard College, echoes this possibility: “[Students] have been led to believe that if you go to X school, then Y will result, and this just isn't true” (in Easterbrook, 2004). Easterbrook writes, “Of course, grown-up land is full of Yale graduates who are unhappy failures... But teens can't be expected to understand this” (2004, online, no page number). While Todd eventually

broke free of the expectations others had for him, his school experiences became the stepping off point for his views on what schools should be and do for their students.

Todd's journey continued with his experience as a middle school teacher at Kingsley Academy ("Kingsley"), an expensive, well-respected private school, where he immediately became a popular teacher. When several long-serving teachers came to resent Todd's easy popularity, he experienced damaging criticism (bullying?) from colleagues, and after several years of enduring their lack of support, he was, he says, "unceremoniously pushed out." Later, he remembers sadly, "The wife of the head of the school told me, 'Todd, it seems like you are the latest victim of the Kingsley Mafia.' Since then, [various educators have] confirmed that my experiences at Kingsley were not unique."

Subsequently, when Todd's 8 year-old daughter told him she was "stupid" and would never be able to learn math, Todd committed to homeschooling her for a year. During that year, he evaluated "every school in the area," for her. He was surprised to come away from that search sorely disappointed in the options available to them.

Mary: For God and Money

Mary founded the Holy Trinity School ("Trinity"), a small religious school that serves children from preschool through 8th grade. The school occupies the largest wing of a church in a suburban neighborhood. Nearly 100% of the students at Trinity are students of color. I was introduced to Mary by a friend whose daughter attends the school.

Like Todd, Mary had been looking for an appropriate school for her children - twin girls she had been homeschooling since birth while she worked part-time. As the

girls approached four years of age, Mary had already covered the entire kindergarten curriculum with them at home. She considered her options, asking herself: “Should I quit my job and complete the homeschool with them? Just kind of start along that path and stay on that path for as long as I could?” She considered sending the girls to their local public school, but administrators there had made it clear that they would not allow the girls to skip kindergarten even if they already had completed the kindergarten curriculum. Furthermore, the local middle school was, according to Mary, “distracting” at best, unsafe at worst. She considered moving to a better neighborhood (“we pack up, we sell our house, we move”), and she researched the educational systems in several nearby counties.

Mary and her husband, a pastor, decided that they also wanted their daughters to attend a school that respected their religious beliefs and values. They looked at various religious schools in the area, but found them to be problematic:

The closest school that was a Christian school that did all the things we wanted it to do...the tuition was, you know...was way too high, especially for two kids...and it was not close. It would mean us getting up [early] in the morning, driving miles away...

After much searching, it became clear to Mary and her husband that they did not have access to the education they deemed would be best for their daughters.

Mary admitted that if she had only one daughter, she might “try putting her in the Christian school and see how it works.” But, with twins, and without the means to pay tuition for both of them, she would be able to send only one child to the religious school. After seriously considering this option, she considered it something of a "Sophie's Choice" to decide which child to send, and ultimately was not willing to sacrifice one

child over the altar of sending the other to a pricey and distant school. Like Todd, Mary found herself caught between what she considered equally untenable educational options. Ultimately, Mary says in a resigned way, like it or not, “You had to kind of make a decision.” She chose to start her own school.

Joe: To Go or Not to Go

Joe is the founder of Science Tech (“Tech”), a public science and math-focused school-within-a-school. I learned about Joe and his school when my employer decided to provide funding to establish the program in a neighborhood in which we had just built a scientific research center. We approached the public school system, proposed the idea of funding the school, and helped them hire Joe to create and operate it. Joe says he was ready to start his own school:

It was only after about 20 years of teaching that I felt I knew what was working and I realized I was doing something very different and beneficial for my kids...I became a state leader and I ended up around people who think about these things.

A colleague of mine knew Joe and thought he would be the perfect person to start the school. He asked Joe one day, “If you were to design a new program, what would it look like?” Only after Joe had produced a design was he informed by my colleague that we had intended all along to ask Joe to start the school. Joe balked. He didn’t mind designing a program, but to start a school would mean leaving his successful career as a teacher and TV show host and moving his wife and special-needs son hundreds of miles from his home of 30 years. While we promised him strong funding and other types of support, there was no guarantee that the venture would be successful, and Joe was realistic about the risks and hard work that would be involved in such a venture.

Joe's subsequent "Should I stay or should I go?" dilemma placed him between a rock and a hard place. It would have been far easier for him to stay where he was. He was beyond middle age, and in a nice position at a high school in which he had carved out a comfortable niche for himself over many years. "I was in a great school. We were doing great things there," he says. To move hundreds of miles and start a "lab" school in the basement of a public high school gave him butterflies. Greene writes, "Exploring unexplored alternatives serves to intensify the unease of those who want perhaps most of all to recover the simpler world of a time long past" (1995, p. 18). Part of Joe wanted to remain in his simpler, more familiar world. The other part of him greatly longed to explore unexplored alternatives. As he tells it, "I could have said no, but I don't know that I wouldn't have spent the rest of my life wondering why I said no."

On one level, Joe wanted to put into practice what he had been learning, dreaming, thinking, implementing, and preaching for many years. He says he knew what he wanted his school to do – "not teaching facts, but teaching [students] how to think." He also wanted every student to be able to spend two years conducting their own scientific research study. He agreed to take the job.

Tech is a school-within-a-school that attracts students with an interest in math and science from several surrounding counties. Students attend Tech in the morning for their math and science classes, then return to their home high schools for the rest of the day. Like the structure of the program, the curriculum is atypical. During 9th and 10th grades, students take a science class that blends together Physics, Chemistry, Computer Science and Earth Science. In 11th grade, they study Biology, and begin to design and carry out

individual scientific research projects. In 12th grade, they take a Research Methods class and a science elective and complete their independent research projects.

These days, Joe tells the school's many visitors with great confidence that he knows of no other school like Tech in the entire country. At the same time, he acknowledges that he does not know everything, and that he is continually presented with innovative ideas.

There are times when I wish I knew more...Everything I read creates an idea. Every time I come home from a conference, I have a new idea.

He believes that education and curricula are not static and that his school will never really be "finished."

Fred: A School for the Gordons

Fred "had a successful, happy suburban public school experience" growing up. For personal reasons, Fred's parents decided to send him to a private school for his high school years. Fred describes the experience as moving from "something good" to "something great. I was just profoundly aware of the opportunity that I had. [I realized at 14] that the quality of one's education could vary widely and could make or break a life."

Upon graduation from college, Fred took a job teaching at a private school near a large city. One of his students, Gordon, particularly made him think. He describes Gordon:

So, I've got 14 ninth grade boys in my homeroom. 13 of them are white and one of them [Gordon] is African-American. He had come in on scholarship from the [inner city] public schools. He'd been picked as a student of promise, but he was behind, both academically and socially. Three-bus, 90-minute commute. No father in his

life, mom was an alcoholic. No quiet place to study, no desk. He has a problem and there's nobody to ask [for help]. And the kids sitting next to him, the other 13 kids, ten minutes home, dinner is waiting, go up to your own room, sit at your desk, do your homework, come down and ask for help on your algebra (because mom and dad *took* algebra). Go to bed, wake up the next morning, put on clothes cleaned by somebody else, have breakfast, ten minutes back to school. Now, how is [Gordon] supposed to compete?

Gordon's situation consumed Fred. How was a kid like Gordon ever to reach his potential given the constraints he faced? Sending him to a private school was obviously not enough given the context within which Gordon lived. Fred desperately wanted to help Gordon and other children like him. He wondered if it might be possible to create a school environment for students like Gordon that would eradicate the many challenges he faced. He wondered what resources would be necessary to give the other Gordons out there the sort of high quality education he had received.

After teaching for eight years and earning a graduate degree in business, Fred and a partner started Growth Academy ("Growth"), a free, public, inner-city charter school. The school serves over 300 children in grades 6-12 and entrance is determined by lottery. It is a boarding school; students live at the school during the week and return home on weekends. Growth provides three meals a day plus snacks for all students five days a week, tutoring every afternoon, and homework help every evening. Students do not have to take care of younger siblings or work after school at McDonald's, and they are not distracted by their parents' poverty or other family or community challenges. The school's website says:

[Growth]'s student life program is the boarding component of the School's 24-hour day, offering enrichment activities, life skills instruction, and support both before and after the

academic day.

The cornerstone of the student life program is the HALLS (Habits for Achieving Life-Long Success) curriculum, which teaches study skills, effective time management, interpersonal communication, and other life skills that will help students succeed in their educational, personal, and professional endeavors.

Fred's goal in starting Growth Academy was to try to eliminate the problems, challenges, and constraints he saw as preventing generation after generation of students like Gordon from succeeding in school and life.¹⁰

Creating New Worlds

Before deciding to start their schools, all four soon-to-be school founders found themselves in educational environments that, to them, rated somewhere between imperfect and untenable. They rejected the educational programs around them as inadequate for themselves, their children, and/or their students. What is it like to be in such a situation and realize it is not going to change? What is it like to be asked to choose the lesser of evils, and what is it like to *refuse* to do so? What is it like to reject the schools so many others consider acceptable?

The saying “between a rock and a hard place” refers to Scylla and Charybdis, the mythical sea monsters from the Greek myth *The Odyssey* that were inspired by a rock shoal and a whirlpool in the Strait of Messina. Scylla, the rock shoal, was a six-headed sea monster on the Italian mainland side of the strait, while Charybdis, the hard place, was a deadly whirlpool off the coast of Sicily on the other side.

Collectively, they comprised a major sea hazard because they were close enough to

¹⁰ Admittedly, there is great controversy over this type of “deficit model” thinking in education, and some readers may vehemently object to Fred's desire to remove poor, black children from their homes and give them a white, upper class education.

each other that they posed an inescapable threat to passing sailors. Avoiding Charybdis meant passing too close to Scylla and vice versa. When forced to choose which monster to confront while passing through the strait, Odysseus opted to pass Scylla (the rock shoal) and lose only a few sailors rather than risk losing his entire ship in the whirlpool (Homer, 1961). School founders choose to chart a new course by starting their own schools. What are their risks? At some point, these four individuals realized they were not going to find what they were looking for.

I am reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration that "it is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable." (Greene, 1995, p. 5)

The realization that the schools in their area are not what they are seeking compels school founders to take action, to transform their dreams of more appropriate schools into realities. "Sometimes one hard-hitting realization is all it takes to change EVERYTHING" (retrieved from <http://www.themiddlefingerproject.org/>). This is not to say that these (or all) school founders are aware of what every other school leader and school reform movement are doing. As such, they might be missing out on the expertise of others in the field. Nonetheless, they decide to change their situation proactively by charting a new course on a road not yet traveled. They decide to create new educational worlds in which students and teachers might dwell in an environment that inspires, and was inspired by, the school founder. "The earth on which I walk is not of my making. Yet my own activity does make a significant difference in the kind of world and earth I inhabit or traverse" (Casey, 2009, p. 250).

At some point, these individuals are motivated to end their search for a “right fit” school and to put their hopes, dreams, and expectations into place:

In life man [sic] commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations. (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 38)

Not content to remain caught between a rock and a hard place, and not content to wallow in broken dreams, school founders reject the status quo and construct a completely new solution for their educational dilemmas. They create whole new worlds in the form of their own schools. In doing so, each school founder is trying to fill the gap(s) s/he discovered in the educational landscape.

Feeling the Gap

Each school founder’s journey begins with the recognition of a gap or gaps in the educational system that s/he can no longer accept. How does it feel to find oneself facing such a gap and be forced to confront the situation? Unable to justify the void, ignore it, or choose between unacceptable options, school founders are like lonely hikers in the middle of a canyon without a path to lead them out.

Uncovering the Gaps

We live with gaps all around us: geographical gaps over which we build bridges, achievement gaps, socioeconomic gaps, gender gaps, racial divides. What does it mean to find oneself in a gap? Ironically, Joseph Levine (1983) introduced the term “explanatory gap” to describe the very challenge we have in answering a question like this.

It is difficult to explain how physical properties give rise to the way things feel when they are experienced. Pain is the result of the physical firing of particular neurons, and can be explained in this physiological sense, but the explanation does nothing to help us understand how pain *feels* (Levine, 1983). Experiences like pain or making a choice between a rock and a hard place, or facing down a void are better understood with an example or analogy. In the next section, I expand on the gaps school founders face and attempt to help the reader feel the impact of the gap as each school founder experiences it.

In describing why she started Trinity, Mary succinctly captures the essence of the gap she was experiencing:

I think the impetus for starting a school was born out of a personal need to find a situation for my children, who were then toddlers... I looked around the neighborhood, I did research for private schools, and what I found was some schools had some things...other schools had other things, but there wasn't one school that had all the components that I wanted.

One major gap for Mary, the “component” missing from most of the schools available to her and her family, was of a religious nature. This particular gap was, and is, unlikely to be filled anytime soon, given U.S. Constitution and Laws, which call for the separation of church and state. Mary did not and could not expect taxpayer-supported public schools to teach the religious content she sought for her twins. And the religious schools she considered were too far away and too expensive, leaving her standing alone in the canyon in her search for a school.

Todd reflects on the sorts of gaps he saw as a teacher at Kingsley Academy:

[Kingsley] was billed as a loving community, full of love and hugs...but the staff was cruel...bullying was rampant...a male faculty member was molesting girls – eventually he served time for it. The girls referred to him as ‘the rapist.’ So, this is what was going on at this [purportedly] loving, value-laden school. Teachers and administrators all enabled this behavior by turning a blind eye to it even when it seemed impossible to ignore, then they dealt with it unprofessionally and unsuccessfully, brushed it under the rug.

At Kingsley, Todd experienced many gaps: gaps in moral principles, gaps in honesty and trust, gaps between the rhetoric of the school and its actual practices, gaps in the curriculum. “I realized that the rhetoric and the practice at the school were miles apart. And the kids knew it, too. [Despite the school’s wonderful reputation, its] kids are not getting anywhere near what they need.” After three years there, these gaps had filled Todd with angst, and he, too, found himself standing alone in the canyon with no hope that the situation would change.

Later, as a parent, Todd found himself in a different educational abyss with respect to the education of his daughter. Many of the schools he visited while homeschooling her declared that they were better than their competitor schools. Todd’s conclusion was different:

There’s almost not a school in [the greater metropolitan area] anymore where I haven’t gotten the inside scoop from either parents or kids or faculty members. And that’s why I can now more definitively than ever say, ‘You know what? I don’t think these schools serve ANY kids well. I think that the best case scenario is that [the kids] are not damaged.’

Todd's experiences as a student, teacher, and parent brought him repeatedly to a place where he felt stuck between what he deemed to be flawed educational options. Unwilling to subject his daughter to these environments, he decided to start his own school.

During his first year of teaching at St. Abernathy's, Fred discovered no fewer than 19 gaps between the educational experience of his affluent white students and that of Gordon, his one poor, African-American student. He asks and answers his own question about bridging the many gaps that separated Gordon from a top-quality education: "What do we have to do to really make [a high-quality education] available to level the playing field so that [lower class] kids could access it the same way as upper-middle-class kids?"

The list rolls easily off his tongue:

Well, you have to get rid of the commute...the responsibility for the younger sibling [and] for mom, frankly...provide supervised study hall, breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, enrichment, athletics and the arts, trips to museums and to the White House and to Greece, SAT prep, really high-quality college guidance, take kids to college campuses, explain how it is that a poor kid can get that college education paid for...You've got to have the kid for 24 hours. There were no schools like that.

If there were schools like that in the region, Fred was not aware of them, and his response was to start his own school with many of the features he describes above.

The literature on the relationship between educational disparities and income is rife with "overwhelming evidence" of the "huge impact poverty has on school performance" (Krashen, 2013, p. 27). Rothstein writes, "For nearly a half century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with a student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators" (2004, p. 11). As Fred noticed, living in a lower social and economic class has many effects on a child's educational

attainment. Drawing from his own experiences, Fred saw how a child's educational attainment affects many aspects of his or her adult life. Rothstein lists some of the "many social and economic manifestations of social class [that] have important implications for learning" (2004, p. 3), including inadequate healthcare and nutrition, inadequate housing, a lower household income, and even cultural differences in parenting. He contends that efforts like Fred's that ameliorate these adverse social and economic conditions as a part of, or in addition to, school reform are generally avoided in educational reform efforts. Rothstein calls them "needlessly neglected opportunities" (2004, p. 11).

Joe was consumed by the gaps he saw between outdated and updated science and math curricula and between schools where students seemed unhappy and schools in which they seemed contented. He says he wanted to build a school with a high "smile index." In addition, he wanted every child to learn to think critically and deeply about science and math as opposed to memorizing countless forgettable facts.

During his 30 years as a teacher, Joe had been living with these gaps, all the while formulating in his mind what he called "a school of dreams." After accepting his colleague Ralph's invitation to start a math/science-focused school, Joe embarked on a journey that school founder Daniel Greenberg would call, "weaving dreams into realities" to create "a paradise" (1995, Dedication page and p. 3). Joe saw the possibilities while in the gap and yearned to realize those possibilities. "Possible," from the Latin *possibilis*, means "that can be done" (Online Etymology Dictionary, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). Joe's vision of what could be done took him farther away from the actuality of the school in which he had been teaching for so many years, and brought him to a place where he could imagine more exciting possibilities. That which is

possible ranks higher than “the actual” (Heidegger, 1927/1993a). For Joe, the “possible” indeed ranked higher than the actual, and he sought to bring that possibility to life.

Gaps of Nothingness

Heidegger writes that we experience angst when we exist in a gap, “There is nothing to hold onto. The only thing that remains and comes over us--in this drawing away of everything--is this "nothingness" (1931, p. 16). A gap exists in relation to *something*. As with a canyon, there are walls that surround it, and if anything is *there* in between the boundaries, the gap ceases to exist.

But, the gap itself is defined by its **nothingness**, and being in a gap is therefore akin to being in nothing. The word *gap* arose in the early 14th century from an Old Norse word meaning *chasm*, which means “deep crack in the earth” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). School founders found themselves in these deep cracks in the earth, and were unsure how to get out.

While it is human nature to perceive gaps in the way school founders do, some gaps may be so deeply woven into our culture and our being that we do not usually notice them. In other words, the gaps may be there, but because they are always there, abiding and empty, most of us do not even remark about or otherwise attend to them. As Casey writes, “The abiding implacement of cultural practices has often gone unacknowledged” (2009, p. 335). Maybe we cannot be expected to notice something that is always not there, and yet, school founders are uniquely aware of these gaps in the form of what is missing from the schools they know compared to the vision they have.

How do school founders experience and understand something that is defined by its nothingness? In this case, the nothingness is not a physical gap. It is the absence of an element in relation to *something*, to whatever is there. The existence of nothingness depends upon the existence of being (Sartre, 1956). If something is “X,” nothingness may be called “no X.” Nothingness is the lack of something, though not a geographical void such as a canyon, or the disappearance of something once tangible.

To school founders, the gap, the void, the nothingness, creates for them a void of sense or meaning. It is the lack of something sensible and meaningful to the school founder who seeks it. It is the lack of something that has never existed before in that realm. Others may not see what the school founders see, and this leaves them to experience this nothingness alone. They feel out of place in the world.

The character Diana Morales in the musical, “A Chorus Line,” expresses the same feeling of being alone and out of place in her first acting class. While working on an improvisation of bobsledding, the other students feel the cold and the wind rushing by. “And Mr. Karp turns to me and says, ‘Okay, Morales. What did you feel?’ And I said...’Nothing, I’m feeling nothing’”(Edward Kleban, 1974, retrieved from <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/>).

This nothingness intensifies for Morales over time, and creates a wider chasm between her and her classmates. “They all felt something, but I felt nothing.” Her “nothing” became evident to everyone, and it was not celebrated. Mr. Karp told Morales to transfer to another school. Her classmates called her “Hopeless” and made fun of her: “The kids yelled, ‘Nothing!’ They called me ‘Nothing.’” Alone in the abyss, Morales found that even digging “right down to the bottom of [her] soul” did not help her to climb

out. Like school founders who do not see what others see, Morales does not feel what the other kids feel, and she is ridiculed because she feels nothing.

Like Morales, school founders find themselves in a place of nothingness. And like Morales, they are subject to much scrutiny and negativity from naysayers and others who do not understand why anyone needs to start a new school. To be considered nothing is to become a non-being, someone smaller than small, a nonentity, a nobody, or even non-existent. This negation, this negativity, however, does not actually reflect the naysayers' belief that the effort is not needed or will fail. It signifies that the effort falls outside the limits of their expectations. We are expected to pick a school and send our children there. Such negative existential propositions arise from the nothingness, from the failed expectations (Priest, 2001). Morales does not cause her peers to call her "Nothing." It is the gap between what others expect from her and what Morales does and says that elicits this negativity.

As nothingness leads to negativity and not the reverse (Sartre, 1956), negativity does not create nothingness. School founders do not become non-beings just because someone judges them negatively. They become non-beings when they dwell in the space between existing schools and the schools they envision and ultimately bring to life. They become non-beings when they do not behave as they are expected to, and yet, these expectations perhaps fuel their passions to do something different.

The *possibility* of nothing must exist for nothingness to occur (Sartre, 1956). This includes the possibility that any thing or person can be nothing or can become nothing. Morales eventually hears a voice that says, "This man is nothing! This course is nothing!"

If you want something, go find a better class.” Likewise, school founders may reject existing schools as "nothing" before turning their focus to the founding of a new school.

For Mary, the impetus to start a school began when her twin daughters were nearly four and she was considering their options for kindergarten. She had been homeschooling them since birth and they already knew everything being taught at their local kindergarten. Mary asked her neighborhood public school if the girls could test out of kindergarten and start in the first grade. She hoped the school’s decision on student placement would be based on the girls’ intellectual progress and on her own assessment of her children. The answer was a bureaucratic no – children were placed in classes based on birth year. For Mary, the thought of sending her twins into an educational system that did not seem interested in understanding their individual skills, preparation, personalities and potential was, “kind of like throwing them out to the sharks, into the ocean and just wondering what was gonna come back.”

Though the gaps may be different for everyone, Mary’s experience is not unique. However, gaps like these may be so well woven into the fabric of our lives, so common, so accepted, that we do not notice them unless someone draws our attention to them. “Dear Mr. Kozol,” wrote the poor, eight year old student, “we do not have the things you have. You have Clean things. We do not have. You have a clean bathroom. We do not have that... You have all the thing (sic) and we do not have all the thing (sic)... Can you help us?” (Kozol, 2005, p. 39). It is because school founders pay close attention to what is happening in education that they notice these gaps.

School founders find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place in a canyon of nothingness. They dwell there for a time, between a place that requires them

to abandon the dreams they have for themselves and their children, and a place they find problematic or even dangerous. In the end, they turn away from the available options and attempt to realize their educational dream by starting a new school.

“Minding” the Gap

Starting a school is a mindful experience for school founders. They engage their minds fully, mind what they do, and mind what happens. They mind with their thoughts and creative ideas, by being careful and on guard, and by caring for, and being obligated to, others. They mind by being thoughtful, wary, and attentive. They are aware, they dare, and they care. In these ways, school founders mind the gaps they perceive as they embark on the journey to start a school.

Minds Aware

A characteristic that makes us uniquely human is that we are *cognitive* beings. We do not simply behave and react to our surroundings instinctively, we also think about them. *Cogito, ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am (Descartes, 1996). We exist because we think: "Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man" (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 217). And we think in sophisticated ways: "Human cultural and technological achievements, powered by our large brains and capacities for language, are astounding...It is widely accepted that intelligence and rationality are the salient driving forces of human behavior" (Kappeler & Silk, 2010, p. 5). Our intellect, our ideas, and our ability to think are what motivate our actions.

The objects of human thoughts and knowledge are ideas. Ideas can be imprinted on the mind through multisensory experiences, and can arise when we either recall them from our memories or create them with our imagination. Our

minds know and perceive our ideas. Garvey makes the case that minds are perceivers of ideas. "Minds, in other words, are the perceivers of ideas" (Garvey, 2006, p. 58). He goes on to say that ideas only exist when they are perceived (Berkeley, 1975). The cookie I just ate and the computer in front of me are and were, merely collections of sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and textures I perceive with my senses. Indeed, these things can only exist in a perceiving mind. (How could the taste of a cookie exist if no one had ever tasted it?) The cookie and the computer - tangible items - are stored in my mind for later recall as mental images, ideas that represent the physical traits I have perceived.

Starting a school is both a mindful and thoughtful act rooted in the creative ideas of the school founder. For Joe, the impetus to start a school derived from a number of ideas he had been turning over in his mind for years. When asked to design a new program, Joe saw an opening that would allow him to put his ideas into practice, to open the school of his dreams. He compares his unique vision with one he discovered in a book:

There is actually a book called *School of Dreams*. I read this book and was horrified. It was the school of nightmares. It was hyper-competitive... I said this book should be re-titled because it's all about pressure, it's not about learning...I KNEW what a school of dreams should look like....

Joe's vision was in no way ordinary, and there were no books to describe the school he was formulating in his mind. His dream school was a collection of thoughts and ideas all his own that had, as far as Joe could tell, never been implemented anywhere. While others might be drawn in by, or changed by, a book about the perfect school, Joe was

not. His ideas had taken years to find their place in his mind, and he was not willing to abandon them.

Over time, school founders make decisions based on their own educational philosophies and ideas. This is not done impulsively, but over many years' time. "The art of patient waiting nourishes the creative process" (Leonard, 2000, p. 12). Time allows the imagination to grow with every new experience and, with time, the mind expands without the "fretfulness [that] can prolong creative blocks" (Idem.). School founders' life experiences, therefore, inform their thinking and creativity, and their thinking and creativity inform their experiences in a continuous, reiterative cycle that eventually brings them to a place of informed moderation. Aristotle refers to this as choosing the mean (350 B.C./1984). Instead of living at one extreme - cowardly or rash – school founders live courageously, at the mean.

Once they have found their philosophical mean, school founders begin to implement their ideas by incorporating elements into the shape of a school consistent with their philosophy. The way in which they build their schools, in turn, shapes their experience. Casey writes, "Yet my own activity does make a significant difference in the kind of world and earth I inhabit or traverse, whether this activity be building [or something else]...the merging of cultural and wild worlds is such that I have a lot to do with the particular world and earth – the life world – I come to experience" (Casey, 2009, p. 250). School founders' thoughts and actions, then, influence their world and are simultaneously influenced *by* that world.

One might suggest that the only way out of being stuck between a proverbial rock and a hard place is to move forward. However, if we continue to move ahead in our

thoughts without a glance back, we will ignore the thinking that came before, we will never re-think our underlying beliefs, and we will be unable to move forward in an original, creative direction. Heidegger (1969) observes in *Identity and Difference* that, “Only when we turn thoughtfully toward what has already been thought, will we be turned to use for what must still be thought” (p. 41). Heidegger is suggesting that the way forward might be easier if we look backward first, or if we at least glance back. Otherwise, we will consider only the “two roads [that] diverge[d] in a yellow wood” (Frost, 1916, p. 9) before us, without considering the road that led us to this place. As Greene writes, “The narratives we shape out of the materials of our lived lives must somehow take account of our original landscapes” (1995, p. 75).

Like the other school founders, Mary considered the road behind her in a mindful decision to start a school. She re-minded herself of her mother’s career as a teacher, and expanded her own mind and thinking about schools by completing an extensive search for information on schooling and education. In something of an intellectual workout, she read “every” education book in the bookstore, and did research on dozens of schools. “So once I got this in my mind, I was in the 'Start a School' section at Borders and I read everything that was in that section, everything about everything related to education....it was such a vast section!” In finding their philosophical “mean,” the other school founders also conducted extensive research on education and schools, and reflected on their experiences as students, teachers, and parents before starting their schools.

When her research failed to turn up a school model like the one she had “in [her] mind,” Mary did not act impulsively. Rather, she continued to consider other options for a time. But, she says, her mind kept returning to the idea. “I just kept *thinking about it*

and thinking about it, and the more I thought about it, the more something just said, ‘Why don’t you just start your own school?’” With time, school founders seem to reach a point at which they are “open-minded” and ready enough to use all they have learned and experienced to imagine creating a new and different educational reality.

Gadamer (1960/2006) speaks of this sort of extension of thinking as expanding horizons:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of the narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. . . . A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. (p. 301)

Gadamer further points out that “The experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic” (p. 350). Dogmatic, according to the Online Etymological Dictionary, comes from the “Greek dogma which means ‘opinion, tenet,’” or “literally, ‘that which one thinks is true.’” Therefore, an experienced person who is “radically” undogmatic will be less opinionated, more open-minded.

It is from the plethora of experiences and the deep, years-long, undogmatic churning of ideas that the school founder's mind becomes more open-minded, imaginative, and creative, allowing him or her to imagine starting a new school. Joe says, "They said to me not, ‘Here is what we want,’ but rather, ‘What would you do?’” He adds, “As soon as they said those words, they had me. I am creative and they allowed me to create.” While he had always considered himself a creative person, one who grabs every opportunity to expand his mind and imagine new possibilities, starting a school

afforded Joe the perfect opportunity to stretch his mind and put his creative ideas into practice.

Leonard writes, "I see the call to create as key to being human. We are called to create by our ability to understand why we are here on earth as part of Creation" (2000, p. 4). Instead of working for, or sending their children to, existing schools, school founders respond to their situation creatively. Leonard calls this early stage of the creative process "the time of surrender" in the "journey of creative transformation" (p. 9). It is a time when creators let go, when creative acts force them to take a leap into the unknown in order to bring their vision into being. It is a time when they give up control and become "open to whatever spontaneously arises and reveals itself" (Idem.). Leonard adds:

To surrender means to give up habitual ways of looking at things so that we are free to see and experience whatever appears...In times of surrender we test and refine our faith, trust, and hope in the creative process. (2000, p. 9)

This is a time of rebirth for school founders, a time during which they abandon any former plans and give in to their inspiration and creativity to carry them through the challenges that loom in the distance. Later, through conscious choices, they "contribute to the greater process of creation" (Ibid., p. 4) by creating new schools. Ultimately, they produce a "newborn" school that not only completes the creative cycle, but, according to Leonard, starts it again by inspiring others to create (2000, p. 10).

Experience shapes the frame of mind or perspective of the school founder, and ultimately gives him or her the mindset of one who is ready to start something new.

Todd says, "Coming out of that year [of home schooling my daughter], I was in the

mindframe of, “What am I waiting for?” Todd's many experiences to that point readied his mind for the *new* experience of starting a school:

Axiomatically, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, the experienced person is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and learn from them. It is a recursive, self-reflexive process, and for the wellness of the world in general and education in particular an important process to recognize. (Snyder, 2009, p. 128)

After years of experience, self-reflection, and living in the in-between, school founders find themselves equipped for the experience of starting a school. Their minds are now filled with ideas about school and schooling, and these ideas are embodied in the tissue and flesh of their brain and body.

We are completely dependent upon our bodies for the creation, storage, and later recall, of our thoughts and ideas. Our experiences, and the thoughts and words we use to communicate about them develop primarily from “visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life” (Johnson, 2007, p. ix). Mind and body “are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity” (Johnson, 2007, p. 1). As Whitman and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006) re-mind us, we are not just mind; we are also body. “For us, the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions” (p. 36). The body is a visible form of our thoughts and aims in that what we do bodily, what we do physically, most often stems from what we think mindfully. As such, school founders engage their mind-bodies fully in the serious intellectual exercise of making the decision to start a school. Soon, they come face-to-face with the risks and dangers that used to loom in the distance.

Minds Dare

The word “gap” also means *chasm*, which is in turn related to the word chaos (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>). How is a gap a chaotic chasm?

Romulus was sitting in his quarters enjoying his meal when suddenly there was a rumbling in the camp and his quarters began to shake. Romulus ran outside to see men and equipment falling into a large crack in the ground. Romulus held out his hand and sent a shadow into the crack to stop its advance and to seal the ground. (Caldwell, 2012, p. 209)

It is dangerous when a large crack in the ground suddenly appears and begins to swallow up men and machines. Notice how Romulus' instinct is to close the gap, in this case by sending "a shadow into the crack to stop its advance and to seal the ground."

Because gaps can be dangerous, they make us fearful. According to Hobbes, fear is one of the first components to make up the natural psychology of humans (Hobbes, 1651/1996). Hobbes' assertion stems from the idea that everyone is more or less as strong and intelligent as the next person, and that this parity of strength and weakness makes us equally vulnerable and insecure. This puts us in a position in which anyone could kill anyone else, either alone or by gathering a group of allies to help them. For this reason, we live with some level of underlying fear, never really sure if we are safe from one moment to the next. In the story above, Romulus tries to stop the gap from widening and tries to fill the crack with a shadow, but then in an unexpected twist at the end of the story, he saves some of the men and feeds them to the dragons.

Culturally, gaps are not to be embraced; they are undesirable voids we seek to fill. Gaps can make us feel incomplete, vulnerable and helpless. They make us afraid, as we

sense the tension and even danger they represent. We try to close the achievement gap, the gender gap, the income gap. The Kennedy School and the Graduate School of Education at Harvard operate a university-wide “Achievement Gap Initiative” (website retrieved from <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/>) to close educational gaps that have persisted nationwide. We rarely aspire to create or widen the gaps we encounter. Instead, we try to bridge or close them. In this attempt to close the gaps, what perhaps, also gets closed?

Although they are empty (and full of nothing), it is dangerous to fall into a gap. Imagine falling into a deep crack in the ground that is difficult or impossible to climb out of. When we fall into a gap, into an abyss, we may find ourselves at the mercy of those who come to our “rescue.” Will those who rescue us brush us off, give us a hot meal and send us on our way, or feed us to the dragons? How might we prevent ourselves and others from falling in in the first place? As school founders discover them, they try to fill the gaps they see in the educational landscape. Once these gaps are filled, they expect no one will fall in anymore, and everyone will have the chance to walk on safer and more even ground.

School founders, too, attempt to fill educational gaps before anyone else becomes engulfed by them. In doing so, they are forced to close out certain options as they commit to others, as in Jardine’s (2006) choice of abundance over breakdown, choosing the road less traveled, and countless other similarly difficult choices throughout history. Choosing a direction at every fork in the road is a necessary, but limiting, step in the process of starting a school.

In the London Underground metro system, many of the train platforms are curved, but the trains that enter them are straight. This creates an unsafe gap when a straight car

stops at a curved platform. Likewise, our educational system may be dangerous to children who do not fit comfortably into the structure of the schools they are supposed to attend. My son, now 17, recently wrote an essay in which he reports that he considers himself a star-shaped peg in a triangle-shaped school. A beloved professor of mine wrote her entire dissertation about how dangerous it is when students do not feel they fit the shape of their school (Snyder, 2009).

In 1968, the London Underground began to play a recorded warning announcement to prevent passengers from being injured by stepping into the gap. The phrase "mind the gap" was chosen for this purpose. Today, all over the modern world,¹¹ metro stations have painted "Mind the Gap" signs on their train platforms, and they play recorded "Mind the Gap" warnings as trains approach. School founders mind the gap, too, by acknowledging the dangers they face as they begin the process of starting a school. These dangers both motivate and challenge them. To school founders, existing schools, which others may consider "schools of dreams" may seem more like nightmares to which they will not send their children and to which they will not expose themselves. They may see these schools as dangerous and "damaging" even when their families, neighbors, and peers vehemently support, defend and justify them.

When they find their ideas drifting from the status quo, and when they truly believe they are "right" - that some aspect of the generally accepted dogma about schools is wrong - school founders find themselves in a dangerous place. As Todd asserts, "The power of denial is formidable," and this denial makes it difficult for school founders to

¹¹ London, Paris, Hong Kong, Singapore, Ireland, Thailand, New Delhi, Athens, Stockholm, Beijing, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Lisbon, New York, Sydney, Manila, Berlin, Madrid, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, and Tokyo. Reference retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_the_gap/

gain acceptance for their unconventional ideas. It takes great discipline and effort to "wrest the new image, perspective, insight, feeling, or behavior from the chaotic welter of old, clinging habits and forces" (Leonard, 2000, p. 9). Voltaire writes, "It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong" (1736, p. 37). As school founders emerge from a chaotic jumble of ideas and convince themselves they are now *right*, and that the established authorities are wrong, they find themselves in a dangerous place. This danger usually results from philosophical gaps, and shows itself in the form of a lack of support for, or an impeding of, the progress of the school founder in his or her efforts to start a school.

Established authorities and others who cling to old habits and forces may become significant impediments to the school founder's efforts to move forward. The least destructive of these inhibitors could best be described as naysayers. School founder Josh Zoia remembers how the town of Lynn, Massachusetts did not want a new charter school when he was establishing a KIPP Academy there. "There was a lot of negativity. We came in, and they resisted" (as cited in Adams, 2007, p. 47). A naysayer is "one who denies, refuses, opposes, or is skeptical or cynical about something" (Merriam Webster Dictionary online at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/naysayer>). The word *naysayer* arose in the 1630s as a derivative of *nay* (no), and *say*, meaning to say no, or to refuse (Online Etymology Dictionary, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>).

At the same time as school founders are saying "no" to existing schools, many around them are saying "no" to their attempts to start a school, or are trying to redirect them from their chosen path. School founders find themselves on the receiving end of constant scrutiny and unsolicited advice from "well-meaning adults" (Todd) who profess

to understand education. “Because they themselves attended school, everyone thinks they are an expert on education,” laments Todd. School founders embark on their project with great purpose and vision, and the hope that their motives and efforts will be understood and supported, only to have their philosophies, ideas, and actions constantly challenged. This is what it is like to start a school that the established order deems unnecessary and that, by its mere establishment, says “no” to the existing schools society deeply values.

Naysayers enter the lives of school founders in the form of friends, family members, and acquaintances. Even a prospective parent admitted to Todd, “I know this [school] is the right place for my daughter, but I’m not up to all of the naysayers in my life.”

It’s the questions, it’s the skepticism, it’s the advice...
Here’s the [challenge]: dealing with well-meaning people who have advice for you. Everybody’s got advice, and it’s either misinformed advice or obvious advice that I don’t take personally [but I want to say], “Do you think I’m a moron and never thought of this?”...but what I have to do is entertain [their ideas] and be polite in the face of everybody who’s trying to be good and helpful.
(Todd)

Joe adds, “Everyone is scrutinizing everything that everybody does [here]...It was really important to find [my] FRIENDS.” Fred adds, “There was some skepticism and we had some things to prove.” The messages these school founders heard repeatedly were, “The schools we have are fine. You do not need to start a new one,” and “Your school will not succeed.” A potential donor told Fred and his partner, “You guys aren’t half as smart as you think you are. Your plan sucks and your board sucks...You’re never going to be able to raise the money you need and you don’t have a [good] plan.” Ultimately, Fred's donor gave him some starter money, but not without telling him

sternly, “Now, don’t f*** it up!” The donor followed up with a phone call the next day to remind him, “I really don’t want you to f*** this up.” When Fred tried to reassure him that the school would not fail, the donor threatened him, “No, I’m not done. If you do f*** it up, it turns out I know a lot of people in this town. Don’t f*** this up!”

Sartre (1956) maintains that all human relations involve conflict. Whenever two people interact, or even glance at one another, they are in competition with each other. This unavoidable conflict ultimately determines which person stands on higher ground and has greater power or freedom - which person is more the master and which is more the slave. The first aim of all relationships, then, according to Sartre, is to establish ourselves in the pecking order of life in which one of us always dominates the other. How much of this sort of power relationship carries over into our schools?

Kreisberg notes that a similar power structure typically exists in our schools, particularly between less experienced teachers and their students. “Student-teacher relationships in U. S. schools are saturated with relationships of domination, of power over” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 153). But, Kreisberg (1992) also sees the potential for a far more effective concept of power relationships in education, which he describes as “power with”:

There is another dimension, or form, or experience of power that is distinctly different from pervasive conceptions. The ignored dimension is characterized by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality. We can call this alternative concept power with. (p. 61)

School founders seem to embrace Kreisberg’s concept of “power with” as they face interpersonal conflict repeatedly. To start their schools, founders try to “power with” real estate agents, suppliers, government bureaucrats, and prospective teachers, parents and

students. They do not have much of a choice but to press on in the face of adversity, competition, conflict, and other power struggles that present themselves. Without a “power with” perspective, any of these relationships might be showstoppers that threaten or arrest the school founder’s progress.

While Fred admits this was the most jarring aspect of his experience, he remained confident that he had what it would take to start a school that would better serve students like Gordon. The naysayers and challengers may have made him think for a moment, but just for a moment, and then he moved on. He says he usually allowed them to “win” or found a way to share power with them in order to continue to move forward.

The primary effect of naysayers and doubters on school founders seems to be to bring forward the idea that starting a school is a less free and more complicated venture than the school founder alone imagines. School founders are not free agents who can do whatever they want. The naysayers and doubters bring into high relief the reality that starting a school is a venture that cannot be accomplished alone, and that every relationship shapes the school founder and the school as other voices and opinions are offered and heard. But, school founders are sailing alone in uncharted waters, without good direction from supporters, as this piece of the poem, “My Heart” describes:

That landing strip with no runway lights
Where you are aiming your plane
Imagining a voice in the tower
Imagining a tower.
(Addonizio, 2009, p. 77)

School founders embark on a journey down a path no one has traveled before. There are no lights on the runway, and there is no tower, let alone a friendly, supportive voice in the tower to coax them along.

But, for school founders who succeed in starting schools, the doubters and naysayers do not deter them from their path. Instead, the conflicts and challenges may sharpen or confirm the thinking of the school founder, and intensify his or her determination to preserve creative freedom and succeed in implementing his or her most authentic vision.

“The Journey”

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.

"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
...But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—

(Mary Oliver, retrieved from
<http://peacefulrivers.homestead.com/maryoliver.html>)

Through the "bad advice," and other attempts to derail the school founders' journey, they are able to leave the negative voices of the doubters and naysayers behind. At the same

time, they are able to hear their own voices again, perhaps more clearly than ever before, and this new voice renews their commitment to their vision. This new voice, their voice, perhaps slightly modified by the experience, keeps them company as they move forward, "determined to do the only thing [they can] do."

Living in an environment of doubt and opposition is an essential part of the school founders' experiences. The constant scrutiny and criticism is difficult to endure, but school founders push past it. Twenty-five years after founding a school, Greenberg writes, "Before [our] school actually started...many people said that we were dreamers, that our vision of a school was utopian. But, now it has existed for years" (Greenberg, 1995, p. 7).

This chapter is dedicated to all those ...who have undertaken the task of starting [a school] only to come face to face with opposition to this task. Take heart! You are not alone. It happens most everywhere...you will no doubt encounter...stumbling blocks placed there most often by none other than those who ought to be the most supportive of your decision. The key, of course, is to turn these stumbling blocks into stepping stones.
(Baker, 1979, p. 81)

What is it like to have your ideas and philosophy challenged constantly?

What is it like to be told, "You can't do it"? How does one turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones? Kelly Webster, founder of The Island School, and Laura Hathaway, founder of The Pegasus School, add: "[School founders] really have to believe in what [they] are doing, because there will be too many naysayers" (as cited in McConaghy, 2006, p. 50). They add that school founders must "have strong faith" in their vision to carry them through the "rough spots."

Todd experienced this challenge to faith in his vision, and says, "It's hard" to remain true to it when the doubters and naysayers "challenge everything I say":

[The novelty of my mission] introduces a whole different dynamic into my interactions, whether it's with a friend who wants to help out or if it is a potential parent for sure, or a potential donor. They want to challenge everything I say. And the key is how do I...navigate this world of people who are going to suck me dry [and] how do I stay true to myself, remain true to our vision? We have to do that. But, it's hard.

School founders experience the need to work diligently to stay true to themselves. This is not a trivial issue. Earlier, I discussed a point in the school founders' journey during which they are intensely open-minded, and how they eventually make choices about the direction they will take with their schools. Once they commit to and refine their concept for a school, they tend to become deaf to the "too many" naysayers and doubters in order to protect their vision from being derailed and their confidence from being shaken. Not succumbing to the well-meaning desires of others, and not succumbing to the status quo is difficult, but school founders dare to accomplish this on the way to starting their own schools.

Levin (1985/2003) points out that in the connection between our bodies and our thinking, we have an "inveterate tendency" to become absorbed in an unnecessarily narrow, needlessly restricted world-field of purposive, dualistically polarized, and mostly ego-centered action" (p. 101). Interestingly, Todd describes *education* in this way, "The thing about the education process is that it is a very narrow one. It is very narrow-minded, black and white, very limiting." In a sense, what Levin and Todd are saying is

that our natural tendency is to narrow our minds toward simpler, more pleasing, ideas that allow us to focus ego-centrally on the tasks before us.

So, after expanding their minds over the years in an iterative, creative, selfless, and open-minded way, school founders succumb to a more narrow-minded, ego-centric focus as they continue on their journey to start a school. At a certain point, the school founder settles into a new mindset. This mindset is strong, focused, and unshakable. "[My husband] knew what was in my mind and I wasn't going to let it go until I figured it out" (Mary). Fred says, "It was all about mindset." This mindset involving a "set mind," while less flexible than the open mind that got them there, proves essential to the school founders' ability to dare to start a school and to persist when their progress is threatened.

And yet, school founders must find the right balance of laser-like focus and open-mindedness necessary to start successful schools, and it is perhaps partly the length and breadth of their overall life experience that allows them this dexterity. Being open to criticism and the ideas of others is an important part of developing as individuals and educators. This is how we learn and improve. Gadamer notes that the more experienced among us are more capable of open-mindedness, learning, and having new experiences:

The experienced person...because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well-equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. Experience has its proper fulfillment...in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (1960/2004, p. 355)

Successful school founders navigate all the "nos" and "you can'ts" and carry on despite them. During her first year as founder and head of The Pegasus School,

Laura Hathaway realized that some of her teachers did not understand her philosophy or could not implement it completely. “Hathaway found herself more than once in a scenario in which she had to decide if a diverging vision or a blow to her credibility in the school community would be more damaging” (McConaghy, 2006, pp. 98-99). She hung on to her prevailing vision at the risk of losing credibility in the school community when community members had what she considered to be unhelpful advice:

Sometimes my darling friends, by contradiction
Caused me embarrassment and much affliction
Though for their good advice I felt indebted
Yet still their counsels puzzled me and fretted
Each may be very useful in its place
But bad if not adapted to our case.
(Unknown, 1858, p. 17)

The book *The Successful Christian School* urges school founders in this situation:

Dare to do right! Dare to be true!
The failings of others can never save you;
Stand by your conscience, your honor, your faith;
Stand like a hero and battle till death.
(Wilson, in Baker, 1979, p. 57)

“Stand like a hero and battle till death.” At times, the opposition may seem so powerful that being brave and true to one’s self and one’s mission means the difference between life and death for the new school. At any rate, being a revolutionary is dangerous.

Perish in pursuit of your goal – I know no higher life-
purpose than to perish in the pursuit of something great and
impossible. (Nietzsche, 1876, p. 319)

In the quotation above, Nietzsche reflects on the consequences of his self-defined meaning of life for the world. To Nietzsche, the world in and of itself has no meaning; therefore, even the greatest deeds must “perish.” Ultimately, yes, everything in the world

will perish. But, a school and its philosophy can exist long after the school founder is gone, as witnessed by the presence, and even growth, of Montessori Schools, Waldorf Schools, and other types of schools whose founders are long gone. School founders believe that it is worth the risks to establish schools they believe will make valuable and lasting contributions to society. Recall that they believe their schools will even "save" children in some way from the educational dangers they face.

At the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Annual Conference in Philadelphia on March 1, 2013, NAIS president Pat Bassett identified three great revolutions in American history: the American Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and "emerging now...a dream of educational revolutions; revolutions regarding how we re-define teaching, re-think learning, and re-design schooling." The theme of the conference was to "dream up revolutionary ideas for the next 50 years of education" as "revolutionary thinkers motivate us to upend the status quo education in pursuit of a new tomorrow." He finished by acknowledging that "Revolutionaries are dreamers. But, revolutions are dangerous and hard." School founders face enormous personal and professional dangers and risks as they "upend the status quo" and re-define teaching, learning, and/or schooling.

Minding the Risk

School founders come face-to-face with many risks as they start their schools. "When you start something, you are in uncharted waters; that's high risk" (Joe). Recall from Chapter 2 that the second meaning of the word "start" involves taking a risk or a risk of failure, and that risk is a major element that defines the essence of starting a

school. There is tremendous risk to school founders, who often jeopardize personal, professional and financial stability in order to convert their dreams into realities.

School founders spoke at length about the risks they faced while starting a school. Of leaving her job to start her school, Mary says, “I was just out there, so that was very risky. I lost the benefits I had and everything. It was just risky because we went from a two salary family to a one salary family.” She felt guilty about not contributing financially to her family's financial resources anymore. She waited on edge for her husband to say, “You know, you’re working every day and not bringing [home] any money.’ He never said it, but I know [those words] were there.” She knew she was risking everything to start a school, including her marriage. “But, you know, you have to be a risk-taker, and I knew I was taking a risk.”

In our quest for that morsel,
how we risked silence,
risked even
love.
(Foerster, 2006)

School founders may risk love and money to open their schools. They risk their closest relationships and their financial security. School founder Allen Blau used all of his savings, cashed out his life insurance policies, and took out a second mortgage on his home to start Barnstable Academy in New Jersey (Adams, 2007, p. 46).

There are other risks, too, that school founders mind. Mary notes the “social risk” she took by not putting her daughters in the local public school when friends told her, “They should be in school with their peers.” She adds that it was “risky to sign a contract” for space in a building, and that her whole experience was filled with “a lot of risk” and a “different kind of risk” and a “constant” risk.

It is a big risk. Risk-taking is an interesting part of all of this. But, boy, you gotta be an intelligent risk-taker. I was an intelligent risk-taker. I didn't mortgage myself up to the eyeballs, you know. There was clearly a risk for me, [but] any change is a risk. (Joe)

Joe worried about the risk of having his financial support from a philanthropic organization disappear. "Am I going to be broke? I am personally so dependent on [them]." His method for managing the risk was to accept it and plan as best he could for the unknown. "I felt I needed to be aware of the risks before I started...to avoid having the risks turn into pitfalls." He tried to anticipate what he could and then, he says, "I put my ducks in order so that when I dove into the pool, I knew I wouldn't smash my head on the bottom. And then I started swimming." Todd says of the risk he experienced, "It became a very nerve-wracking 'down'" due to the financial debt he was assuming, the roller coaster nature of the journey ("I'll be up for a day, then down"), and the unpredictability of it all. He says, "For the first two years, we will be cash poor and the question is can we survive?"

I'll raise a bourbon, plant my elbow on the bar
and drink to the odds that one more shot
won't have me wearing a suit of blues.
I'm so exposed, with you all of me is at risk
(Lilley, 2008)

The school founders in this study also took risks when speaking with me. What if their stories were publicly exposed? What if certain names or details were not disguised appropriately in my writing? Our conversations were not politically correct. They were not polite conversations about socially acceptable topics. They were honest and openly autobiographical, even confessional. Participants mentioned people or schools by name that had been unethical in their dealings with them. They confessed deep thoughts and

exposed their innermost feelings about their experiences. As I probed, they risked everything all over again, opening windows and doors into themselves and letting their stories out to allow me to access their experience. Zucker writes:

There needs to be risk. Confessionalistic poetry is more risky than Autobiographicality. Autobiographicality, no matter how disturbing in content, is always the story of a life, of what happened, of circumstance and event. Confessionalistic poetry is the splitting open of self, a minor chord before and without resolution...Privacy, reputation, and decency, may all be risked by the Autobiographicalistic poet. But the Confessionalistic poet risks more; she is willing to undermine the boundaries of self. (2011, online, no page number)

Fred, a self-proclaimed “risk-averse risk taker” says, “Risks are there to be taken, not flippantly, but to be taken. I didn’t like the realization that my career was at risk, but honestly, it was unrealistic for it to happen any other way.” By minding the gaps, minding the dangers, and minding the risks, school founders seek to avoid falling headlong into a chasm never to emerge again. By minding their steps, minding where they are going, successful school founders navigate the deep cracks in the ground, the doubters and naysayers, and the other dangers and risks that threaten to derail their efforts to start a school.

The Mindedness of Caring

While school founders are mindful in thoughtful and daring ways, they are also mindful in a caring way. They mind in the sense that they *care*. Because mindedness is an embodied experience, their ideas, fears, and cares are not simply intellectual. They are bodily, and as such, never leave them and cannot be escaped. The “intertwining” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 247) of world and body, of the intellectual and the corporeal, honors the truth our bodies come to know. “What we take to be true in a

situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 102).

This embodiment allows school founders to feel and remember the pain of living in a gap, to feel stuck between unattractive options, to feel the fear brought on by the risks and dangers of thinking about, talking about, and ultimately starting a school. “I don’t recall much of what went down. I know that it’s engraved there on some cellular level” (Rivard, 2011, at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22122>). Because school founders carry this embodiment of their minds embedded in their very flesh and bones, this mindedness is with them always, and it nags. They are unable to purge it, unable to unload it, unable to walk away from it, unable to ignore its constancy. At some point, they cannot live with it anymore. They mind enough to stop thinking about where they are and actually do something to change the situation. Kant (1929) re-minds us that the mind is active, not passive. Perhaps the active mind is what spurs the mindful body into action. In the sense of, "Do you mind?," school founders do mind. They care, and they care enough to take action.

Consider Todd’s experience as he weighs the educational options available to his daughter. His angst is exacerbated by the feeling that the logical choice – an existing school – would be “damaging” to her. “There’s tremendous side effects from going down [the traditional school] path which are basically emotional and psychological, and physical sometimes...” As a father, Todd cares deeply about his daughter. He does not want her to face "emotional, psychological, and physical" harm, which he believes she would experience at any of the schools available to her. It is Todd's unwillingness to put

her in harm's way, and his care for her well-being, that motivates him to seek a "better" option for her, even if it means he has to create that option himself.

For most of us, starting a school from scratch is far too large an undertaking to assume, and most of us do not have the ideas, time, creativity and courage necessary to start a new school. But, while the rest of us are settling for the best available educational option, school founders are starting their own schools. What is this level of caring, beyond the instinctive desire to care for one's own children, that motivates school founders to start their own schools? What calls them to the task?

Caring for Other People's Children

I'm starting a school because I want to educate children. I want to see them develop. (Mary)

Heidegger (1953/1996) professes that at the root of all of our experiences as human beings in the world, we have specific intentions grounded in a "care" for others. To Heidegger, care is what makes us human. Care is inevitable and essential, and all of us care. Indeed, "care" tends in the direction of bringing man back to his essence, Heidegger explains (1947/1993c, p. 223). Since no matter what we do in life, "producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing" (Heidegger, 1953/1962, p. 56), we do it with care. At the core of our being, our human existence, there is care.

Heidegger's notion of care derives from his concept of Being, or being human in this world. As we move toward fulfillment, we do so in an attitude of care. We care for ourselves; that is, we nurture, explore, and seek out the fullness of our own Being, and we are responsible for our own existence. Noddings (2005b) describes Heidegger's notion of care as our being "immersed in care; it is the ultimate reality of life" (p. 15). As an

affirmation of this, the converse also applies. We do not do what we do not care to do. We do not go where we do not wish to go. And we do not say what we do not care to say. Care, then, is essential to carrying out our lifelong project of being in the world. It also may suggest a reasonable and desirable basis for the school founder's decision to start a school - out of a care for the educational development of children.

“Man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da...into ‘care’” (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 231). Da-sein (Da meaning here and there, Sein meaning to be) or to be human everywhere in the world, then, is sustained in part through an authentic care for others, not just for ourselves. This is an “other-focused” care, where care involves focusing on freeing the Other to create itself, not on creating the Other as an expression of oneself (Anton, 2001, p. 157).

School founders may be predisposed to develop children in a manner that allows them to create themselves, particularly if the school founders were not given the freedom to do so themselves. From the stories of school founders, recall that they were encouraged to accept a way of being that did not always “fit” with their idea of themselves, that threatened their attempts to become more fully human. They may reveal this by starting schools that allow children to grow into the individuals they *are* rather than forcing them to become the beings someone else wants them to be. By doing so, they show they care to free the Other to create itself.

Freire suggests that we are predisposed to being free and to freeing ourselves from injustice and oppression. This is “affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (2004, p. 44). He goes on to say that our natural state as human beings is one of humanization.

Humanization is “the people’s vocation” (Ibid., p. 43), and school founders may start schools as a reaction to educational injustices that threaten this humanity and diminish both the school founder’s and the children’s ability to become more fully human. “This struggle is possible only because dehumanization...is *not* a given destiny, but the result of an unjust order” (his emphasis, Ibid., p. 44). For school founders, the unjust order is the nonexistence of the kind of confirming, humanizing school the school founder seeks.

Noddings narrows Heidegger’s broad definition of care to “solicitousness toward other living beings, a concern to do things meticulously, the deepest existential longings” (Noddings, 2005, p. 15). She defines care as “a caring relation...a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for” (Idem.). According to Noddings, both parties must participate in a caring relation. The carer must care and the cared-for must receive that caring.

When school founders care to start schools, they show that they care about meeting the educational needs of children. “Just as we consider, plan, and reflect on our own projects, we now think what we can do to help another...we are seized by the needs of another” (Noddings, 2005, p. 16). How much the “other” feels cared for did not show itself abundantly in the course of this study, perhaps because the study did not ask for the response of students under the care of each new school. Nevertheless, it is likely that beneath the activity of starting a school, this care and caring relation resides.

Levinas (1961/2007) further suggests that the fact of our interconnectedness as human beings places a moral burden upon each of us to care for one another. In an interview at his home in Paris in 1986, Levinas summarizes his philosophy this way: “With the appearance of the human – and this is my entire philosophy – there is

something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other" (as cited in Wright, Hughes & Ainley, 1988, p. 172). For Levinas, being beholden to others is not a tangential or temporary state of being. Our responsibility to others is not merely important, but our entire reason for being (Levinas, 1991).

To the school founder, the Other in "other people's children" is not treated as a separate, unknown entity but as a partner in the process of starting a school, a partner who will cease to be an "Other" and become "just another" with time. Like Levinas, school founders feel responsible for understanding the many others (teachers, students, etc.) who ultimately come to create meaning with them. This understanding and meaning are, in turn, created through one individual's response to the Other in an interconnected, reiterative web of existence.

While Levinas contends that our reason for being includes an infinite and absolute responsibility to others, and that many (even all) other beings call to us at different times, he has a soft spot for the vulnerable and the poor, such as Fred's student Gordon. The neediest among us, says Levinas, are the ones who have the greatest influence on what we do, and they live above us, not beneath us. Even the destitute person is not beneath him, says Levinas, but "above me as my lord, my master, the one who I must obey" (Levinas, 1991, p. 229). In this way, "Levinas claims that the self-other relation is not reciprocal, but rather that there is a priority of the Other over the self" (Moran, 2003, p. 346).

Is our obligation to others, particularly to those more vulnerable and needy than ourselves, our greatest obligation? If so, it also may be one of the most complex. The more "different" other people and their children are, the more difficult it is to understand

them, their needs, and how to respond to them appropriately. Delpit says we need to “step outside of [ourselves] and [our] beliefs in order to allow the perspective of others to filter in” (2006, p. xxvi). We need to listen to the children themselves, their parents, and their teachers in order to have an appropriate understanding of who the children are and what they need. Although a natural part of our essence, it is, at the same time, hard work to care for others appropriately.

Noddings (1998), however, cautions that as long as we can see people in need as the Other, we see ourselves as “safe,” and as “not like them.” As long as they are not us, we can construct a box around them and effectively eliminate them from our daily concerns. We can live our lives as if they do not require the response from us proposed by Levinas, and as if our indifference does not affect the authenticity of our very selves as explained by Heidegger and Anton. We can comfortably live our lives while ignoring, or even denying, the enhanced opportunities and privileges we have and the impact of our privileged responses on others.

One of the school founders in this study started a school specifically targeted on poor children. None of the school founders started schools exclusively for the purpose of educating their own children or already privileged children. All of them set out to educate other people’s children, too. Three of the four did not have children at all or had children in other schools when their own school opened. Joe’s son had special needs that made him a poor fit for a math and science magnet program, and one of Todd’s children elected to stay at a religious school he had attended for many years. Later, however, Todd’s son visited 21st Century and, at the end of the day, asked Todd, “Dad, can I come

to your school?” He enrolled at 21st Century the next day, and became one of the school’s first graduates.

The school founder's passion for developing children goes well beyond what they want for their own children. They have a desire to serve *other people’s children*, too. So, while a certain child (biological or otherwise) may serve as the spark that initially motivates school founders to undertake this journey, each school founder feels responsible for providing as many children as possible the most appropriate educational experience possible.

Whereas Gordon was the spark that lit Fred's fire, Fred later tells the story of one of the first students to join Growth Academy, a student he feels would not have done well elsewhere, and the type of student Fred hoped his school would serve:

[At the school’s first Orientation], there was one young man, he was fat and he had acne and it was hot. He was covered head to toe in sweatpants. He didn’t want any part of his body to show. He literally wouldn’t say a word. He sat in silence for 45 minutes and just looked at [one woman]. I’m absolutely convinced – I mean absolutely convinced – as I got to know this kid that he would be dead today [if he had not attended Growth Academy.] He is *the* kid that [peers] would have tormented to death. He was fat and weird and had a high-pitched voice and spoke in extremely carefully chosen words, and he was gay. They would have tortured him to death, literally. They would have beaten him to death. Today, he is a college graduate and an artist, but I’ll never forget the day I met him.

While we might question Fred’s prediction that this student would have been tortured to death in another school, it is partly the fact that Fred cared about the boy without even knowing him, that fueled Fred's determination to open his own school. Like Fred, each school founder creates a school that includes other people's children. While they keep the children who provided the initial spark for the school in mind, their

schools quickly grow beyond them. “Everything I do, every decision I make is about the students – what’s best for the kids...” (Zoia, as cited in Adams, 2007, p. 47). School founders demonstrate a sense of care for all children, as is evidenced by the mindfulness of their thoughts, words, and actions. Although Mary's daughters were in the first class (of five students) at her school, the school now serves dozens of other children. Mary remembers, “The thing about it was I wanted to do it for other kids. It wasn’t just mine. I really had this innate desire to do it for some other kids.” If not for her desire to serve other people’s children, Mary says she would not have started a school. She would have simply continued to homeschool her daughters.

A Helping Hand

Then sow; for the hours are fleeting
And the seed must fall to-day;
And care not what hands shall reap it,
Or if you shall have passed away
Before the waving cornfields
Shall gladden the sunny day.
(Adelaide Anne Procter, in Baker, 1979, p. 100)

Anton (2001) adds that “Others must not be reduced to entities which are there at-hand for me” which “can be taken up to serve my concerned interests or not” (p. 156). School founders seem to know this at some level, that their institution is an investment in the adults and the world of the future, and that they are sowing seeds today that will blossom into the plants of tomorrow. They "care not what hands shall reap it." Their goal is to educate and develop children out of a deep passion for what they want for children, not to reap direct benefits from the seeds they sow.

Teaching other people's children is not a new practice. For centuries, teachers have taught children who are not their own biological children, but we do

not often address the mystery and complexity this adds to the practice of teaching. No matter what, though, educating other people's children is something of a selfless act. It is this selflessness that allows us to make a long-term investment in children, an investment that will not necessarily have a direct return to us in our lifetime. Yet, each school founder embodies "caring mindedness" in his/her desire to develop children, no matter who the children belong to or how "needy" they may be:

I can't relinquish the surety of myself –
in all my belief in you.
You – both beautiful and ugly –
in your selfishness and sophistication.

My thoughts were undiluted...
My thoughts were pure, as my intentions.
These feelings were never about me.
They were about you.
(Ashlie Margaritis, "I Am Truth, in Selflessness," retrieved from
<http://hellopoetry.com/words/selflessness/poems/>)

Aristotle (350 B.C./1984) maintains that, to be happy, we must use our minds to think rationally and reasonably, and we must act with morality and moral virtue. As discussed earlier in reference to Levinas's work, underneath the actions of school founders is a heightened, almost hyperbolic, sense of the moral importance of educating children appropriately. They may even see their schools as necessary to save children from harm, not just as places that will provide them with an alternative form of education.

A few years after his school opened, Fred says, "It really became clear to us that what we were doing was making or breaking lives" (Fred). School founder Allen Blau (Barnstable Academy) adds, "You really are, in a sense, saving a life" (as quoted in Adams, 2007, p. 46). Recall also Todd's desire to protect his daughter

from the "emotional, psychological and physical harm" he had seen her suffer at other schools, and Mary's desire to save her children from eternal damnation by ensuring they receive a religious education.

One could argue that school founders are exaggerating or misguided, that our children need not be "saved" from our existing schools, but there is no denying that they mind what happens to children in the way lifeguards care about saving people from drowning. This "lifesaving" mentality permeates the stories they choose to share as if to say, "If we weren't saving lives, what would be the point?" And, "Look at me - I'm a life saver!" They are proud of, and happy about, what they are doing, and the lives they feel they have saved. They are eager to show the world the enormous importance of their work.

Caring for One Another

Levinas argues that we are committed to *each other* and that we have an obligation to *someone*; that the essence of our existence as humans includes feeling a commitment not to things, but to *other humans*. Our face-to face encounters with another person, and our inescapable encounters with others, define us (Levinas, 1991).

You think [to yourself], "What I'm doing now is really going to affect a lot of people. Not just the kids that come to [my] school, but it's also going to impact their families."
(Mary)

Anton suggests that the creation of an authentic self is based on our concerned attention to others, even when there is no obvious benefit to us: "We accomplish selfhood in caring for the world and concerning ourselves with others, even when these are not tied back to 'self interests'" (2001, p. 153). That school founders care so much about

children might show itself as moral superiority framed by an underlying confidence that they are the best person to start the kind of school they envision. They may believe they are the right person, or even the *only* person, who can accomplish the task of caring for children by starting a school:

This is my work; my blessing not my doom;
Of all who live, I am the one by whom
This work can best be done in the right way.
(Henry Van Dyke, as cited in Baker, 1979, p. 136)

Like Van Dyke, Joe undertook the challenge of starting his school with the mindset that he could do it “right.” He says he “felt the need to do [it] right, for everyone involved.” Joe’s definition of “right” was to “make sure that every decision I make is good for the school and the culture of the county.” A need to “do it right” may underlie the motivation and confidence school founders have at this stage of the journey. Their belief that the stakes are high, they need to save children, and they need to “do it right,” seem to culminate in an intense, unshakable focus on starting the school.

Still, school founders are motivated to start schools not as a self-serving or egotistical adventure, but by their desire to serve children.

I think you have to be adventurous to start a school.
But, if I look at my colleagues, other people who have
started schools, every one did it because of a passion
for what they wanted for children. (Kelly Webster, co-
founder and first head of the Island School, in
McGonaghy, p. 41)

McGonaghy not only confirms that school founders have to be a bit rebellious (adventurous) to start a school, but that they do so from a place of passion for providing children with the type of educational care they deem best. Educators “who care” create a “context where students can learn freely,” and affirm that “educating students is really the

primary agenda, not self-aggrandizement or assertion of personal power” (hooks, 2003, p. 91).

Underneath the intense, unshakable focus on starting a school looms an intense sense of obligation, an obligation to develop children in safe and effective ways. This sense of obligation is so strong, and the desire to save other people's children so important that school founders are driven to press on despite the dangers, blockades, and the risks associated with the undertaking. Due to the obligation to care, the decision to start a school may be the only decision the school founder can make.

Do You Mind? - Obligation and Purpose

It is not only that school founders detect a gap in the educational landscape or that they creatively mind their way to the model of a school that could fill the gap. It is not enough that they feel the gap, acknowledge the risks and dangers of the situation, and care selflessly about saving and developing other people's children. There is another aspect of the experience that moves school founders to decide to start a school and to persist until they succeed. This is the *obligation* to start a school that is fueled by the desire to have a *purpose* in life.

Everyone has an obligation as well as the privilege of leading in something. (Baker, 1979, p. 150)

Jardine et al., suggest that a commitment of this magnitude involves a heavy sense of “being compelled” (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 34). It is not simply having an inner drive or motivation to do something, but rather the idea that one is being driven *by something* in the same way as consciousness is always the consciousness *of something* (Husserl, 1970a). By what are school founders driven? Do they feel called to start schools? Is this obligation a calling?

A Calling?

It is this feeling of being called to serve, care, and advocate that pulls my eyelids open at the crack of dawn to put on my ciel blue polyester-blend scrubs. (Nurse Anita Chupp, as cited in Sergi & Gorman, 2009, p. 4)

What is a calling? In 1904, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke responded to a young soldier who'd sought his advice on becoming a writer. Rilke suggested that a sort of calling can be found only inside oneself. "This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity" (Rilke, 1929/1984, p. 6).

The impulse of a calling pushes or pulls in a particular direction with a force that cannot be denied. Huebner (1993) writes of teaching: "Teaching is a vocation...A vocation is a call" (p. 411). He goes on to describe the aspects of teaching that make it a calling, a vocation of labor and discipline with a spiritual dimension that grabs and will not let go. Teachers who are called to teach are called not just by one, but by a triumvirate of forces, says Huebner – the students, the content, and the institution. One or more of these forces motivate the teacher to rise every morning, make his or her way to the "institution within which [s/he] lives," and be with students (Idem.). They cannot imagine doing anything else.

Conversely, if one can live very comfortably without doing something, it is not a calling. Coats extrapolates Rilke's advice to people in other occupations and distinguishes between an obligation and a calling:

If you can live a full, satisfying life without doing it, it's not "your necessity," it's not your calling. Not even if you're

really good at it...Rilke might agree that the presence of any language of obligation would be all the evidence you would need to differentiate the true calling from the false. To say *I must because I should* implies an obligation, not a calling. *I must because, if I don't, I'll die inside* is quite another matter. (Coats, 2013, emphasis mine)

Although all of the school founders in this study were “really good at” starting a school, or at least succeeded at it the first time, none felt a *calling* to open a school lest they die inside. All were successful professionally in other fields and had engaging opportunities available to them. They were not looking for something else to do. None remembered thinking as a child or young adult that s/he would start a school. Mary recounts:

I didn't grow up thinking, 'I'm going to open up a school one day.' No, I didn't. It wasn't my lifelong dream to have a school.

Todd also did not open his own school out of a calling to do so. His motivation grew very slowly. Only after he had reflected on his own 19 years of schooling, been a teacher for many years, and watched his own children "fall apart" in school, did he decide that the options for him as a teacher and parent were unacceptable. And only at this point did his discontent motivate him to start his own school. Even with that, it was four years from the time he decided to start the school until it opened its doors.

Obligation

None of the school founders in this study felt a calling to start a school, but they did feel an *obligation* to do so. The word obligation comes from the Old French *obligacion* meaning “obligation, duty, responsibility,” and from the Latin, *obligationem*, meaning "an engaging or pledging," or more literally a “binding” with promises or by law or duty (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com>).

School founders feel bound by duty to respond to the educational needs of children they feel are not being met by existing schools.

The leap from an idea to the opening of a school is less of a deliberate decision on the part of a school founder than it is a foregone conclusion. Todd suggests he had no choice but to start his own school. "What was I supposed to do?" he asks. The alternative, he explains, would have been to sit back and watch as the existing system failed yet another generation of children, this time including his own. He had already pulled his daughter out of a well-regarded private school and homeschooled her for a year to "make her whole again." He had reached a point at which he had run out of acceptable options. He could not find a school that offered his children the values, skills and experiences he wanted them to have as adults in the 2020's. He believed he could create a superior educational environment for his and other people's children. At the same time, he could not justify sending his children back to the schools they had attended or imagine sending them to any other existing schools he had studied. When asked why he started his own school, he says simply, "I HAD to do this."

This sense of obligation includes both a sense of responsibility to act and a sense of commitment to the cause; a duty and a responsibility (response-ability). It is a response-ability in that school founders are capable of responding with care to both the educational situation and to the responses students have to their care. The Other "provokes a response from me and my response is at the same time my responsibility; Levinas never tires of emphasizing the close connection between these two terms" (Moran, 2000, p. 349). Levinas emphasizes that we have a moral obligation (responsibility) to respond appropriately to the Other in which, "The nature of the ethical

is to provide the appropriate response” (p. 349). Although Levinas is not clear about what an “appropriate” response might be in different contexts, “he offers a framework to use to think about the demands the Other might place upon us as we negotiate the world together. If we have a moral obligation to respond to the Other, what effect does our choice of response have?” (Snyder, 2009, p. 26).

Joe had just built a “Caribbean Room” onto his home and was looking forward to spending time in it as winter turned to spring. He muses:

I was comfortable and successful. I was a very busy person. I taught and I had an Emmy award winning TV show, and I didn’t have the spark or the need to start a school. I had my own little kingdom. I was happy...I could have retired and gone fishing in Florida or just been a good teacher and remained a leader amongst my peers.

But, Joe felt he had no choice but to start a school: “I could not turn [the opportunity] down...I could not say no...It became a no-brainer.” Like Todd, Joe felt he had reached the point of no return, the point at which he needed to try to build his version of a school of dreams. He gave up his job, his home, and his stability to do so. Now completing its seventh year of operation, his public charter school is growing, changing and thriving and attracts over 600 applications each year for 65 slots.

What brought Joe to this place? What made him feel obligated to leave his comfortable life and home and move 400 miles to start a new school? The school founders’ obligation and care in this situation overtakes the desire to do anything else – to keep a powerful job, to make or save money, to stay in a comfortable home. As such, school founders start schools despite the risks and difficulties they know they will be

assuming. And they start schools despite the pressure not to do so, and despite the ease with which they could simply embrace an existing alternative.

Underneath Joe's desire to retire and go fishing was a care to develop the next generation in the best way he knew how. He describes his desire to learn all he could about teaching in order to serve his students well: "I wish I had more time to read Sadler's work about inquiry; it would help me," he says. He follows this thought quickly with, "And I have to [read] that. I owe it to my students to do that." This sense of obligation, the notion that he "[has] to," and that he "owe[s] it to [his] students" outweighs Joe's desire to kick back in his Caribbean Room or go fishing. Jardine et al. explain, "Understanding the places we inhabit therefore requires of us a sense of obligation...commitment" (2006, p. 7), and "this sense of "being compelled" is not simply a psychological urge...it means *being driven*" (2008, p. 34). Joe was clearly driven to take action. Kicking back and doing nothing was not an option.

Doing Nothing

When I passed him near the bus stop
On Union Square while the cops
Cuffed his hands behind his back, while he
Said, "I didn't do anything,"
I didn't either,
Do anything but look away,
A little afraid they might cuff me
If I paid too much attention,
And walked on still wondering
What he might've done
And still more what I
Might've done.

(Gerber, 2007, section 1, poem 4, no pagination)

Is our place in life, then, driven by a sense of obligation and commitment?
Do we seek to be committed to something? Jardine et al., argue that being
committed to something is an innate drive, "something that teachers recognize in

very young children” (2008, p. 34). School founders experience a sense of duty or responsibility to save children, partly because they "owe" it to them and partly because they believe that no one else will do it.

Minding the Unthinkable

Todd relates: “I was a success story...Ivy League undergrad and Stanford Law School. [As an attorney], I was making a ridiculous amount of money [and] I had the nicest apartment I’ve ever had.” And yet, at a certain juncture, Todd felt the need to leave his comfortable life behind and serve others he felt were needier than his clients. Despite the place he occupied socially and financially, by many measures a comfortable and successful place, Todd was “absolutely miserable.”

Despite the pleas of his friends and family to stay the course, Todd quit his job as an attorney to become an educator. He was compelled to contribute to the world in a different way and to do so, had to turn his back on the “perfect” life others thought he was living. His friends and family told him he was “crazy” to walk away from everything for which he had worked so hard. But, Todd saw it as *exactly* what he needed to do.

Sometimes, something unthinkable is just the spark we need to help us change our way of thinking. At my house, we have a message on our answering machine that makes us smile every time we hear it. My mother-in-law left it months ago, and we have been careful not to erase it. It is an earnest message delivered with deadpan casualness: “Hi. It’s Nana Polly. I have sad news. We missed the no-pants subway ride. It was today at 2:00...” Mind you, none of us had ever heard of this event, nor were we planning to participate in it, and no one was sorry to have missed it! I believe what we find so

disarming about the message is that my mother-in-law makes a counter-culture event (during which people apparently ride the Metro without any pants on) seem like something not only sanctioned by society as a whole, but in which everyone would participate if they just knew about it ahead of time. Rather than extraordinary and debatable, she makes the event sound pedestrian and desirable.

It is human nature to accept the doctrine presented to us from birth. Our particular worldview is, therefore, largely attributable to the accident of our birth. That is, most of us blindly accept any set of doctrines that happens to be valued by the tribe into which we are born and raised (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). We are indoctrinated to a worldview by those who came before us, a worldview that permeates our families, neighborhoods, schools, and media. Our outlook on life, therefore, seems natural to us, and makes us suspicious of alternative views.

Then there are those who dare to think differently. Postman and Weingartner write of the “romantics” among us, the “courageous and imaginative thinkers” who “believe that the human situation is improvable through intelligent innovation” (1969, p. xiv). These innovators are more sensitive to the “built-in biases” of their culture, and see that the language of their tribe is “limited, misleading, or one-sided” (Ibid., p. 5). They also see the effects of any bias on the behavior and activity of those in the environment, and the limitations those activities place on the human condition.

By starting new schools, school founders are doing something unexpected, counter-cultural, and subversive:

My auntie gives me a colouring book and crayons.
I begin to colour.
After awhile she looks over to see what I have done
and says

you've gone over the lines
that's what you've done.
What do you think they're there for, ay?
Some kind of statement is it?
Going to be a rebel are we?
I begin to cry.
(Evetts-Secker, 1994, p. 1)

Just as the child above colors over the lines, school founders step over many lines in the process of starting a school. As a result, they are often labeled as rebels. As demonstrated by the Evetts-Secker poem above, it is natural to criticize rebellion or any deviation from the expected. We are not kind to those who color outside the lines, let alone those we consider “eccentric.” But, who draws the lines, and why do they draw them where they do? And how can we change the world if we do not have the authority to change where the lines are drawn?

It is a natural fear of the extraordinary, anything out of the ordinary, that keeps us coloring within the lines. For school founders, this fear of the unusual shows itself in the words and deeds of the “naysayers” who criticize the school founder’s decision to start a school. Some naysayers go so far as to try to stop the school founder from opening the school. School founders’ actions have the potential to jolt the rest of us out of our mundane way of thinking and might allow us to think differently about the world and school, but we are not always ready for this. It is easy to explain away the behavior of the school founders as an irrational response to their circumstances and personal histories. Our tendency is to support our schools, and to question the motives of the school founders. According to Postman and Weingartner, members of our society who think differently are considered “subversive” and even dangerous: “Such a man is dangerous because he is not easily enlisted on the side of one ideology or another,

because he sees beyond the words to the processes which give an ideology its reality” (1969, p. 5). Putting their plans into action makes school founders visible and makes their schools real. And it is the reality of their schools that can tip an observer’s scale from indifferent to worried.

Brafman and Brafman found in their research that people have a tendency to act irrationally when they fear a loss and when there is a lot on the line, “We’re all susceptible to the sway of irrational behaviors” (2008, p. 7). But, while school founders fear the loss of educational opportunity for some children, and so believe there is plenty “on the line,” they do not start schools as an irrational response to the experiences of a few children. And they do not start schools just to be rebellious, shocking, or subversive, even though their actions may be interpreted that way on the surface. In the words of Emily Dickinson, “Assent – and you are sane – Demur – you’re straightaway dangerous” (1924, Part One, Number XI).

As school founders sift through their unconventional thoughts and design unconventional schools, their decision to start a school seems to be less and less of a decision and more and more of an obligation. At a certain point, Todd had rejected every other educational option available, and had “talked to a ton of people” who told him, “all schools are basically the same.” While Todd says his first impulse was to dismiss this generalization as too simplistic (that all schools are basically the same), he later embraced it. “In this case, it really was the case,” he says. At that point, he rejected the schools around him, shifted his agency away from passivity, and saw that he did not have to accept the educational options currently offered. He saw the educational landscape as

less fixed and more mutable. His imagination in high gear, he decided to try to build a superior alternative.

We had refused the world as we found it, and moving beyond dull passivity, launched ourselves as warriors of repair. The drama of living was suddenly unscripted, and we were improvising in a world no longer immutable, no longer finished or fixed. Our imaginations cracked things open and the intensity was intoxicating...we were preparing something new and, we thought, dazzling. (Ayers, 2001, p. 71)

These are not Todd's words, or even the words of a school founder, though they certainly could be. They are the words of Bill Ayers, who rejected the Vietnam War era world in which he was living and struck out to build a better one. Ayers stepped over the line (again, who draws these lines?) and was labeled a rebel. Greene supports this sort of powerful "resistance to the taken-for-granted, a desire, a way of seeing, the awareness of what is not yet...a critical consciousness of what is ordinarily obscured" (1992, pp. 205, 213). The first woman to attend the Citadel, the first women to go to a prom together, and a biracial girl whose Principal called her a "mistake" found their schools, families, and communities to be scenes of such "torture, denial, exclusion" (1998, p. 211), that they felt obliged to speak out. Greene writes:

These young women all looked at the world around them and said, No. Gutsy, rebellious, pained, and courageous, they imagined a world of justice, and they demanded no less. (1998, p. 211)

Many, like school founders, experience the pain that accompanies thinking and acting differently, and the experience of being told that what they are doing is criminal. As an innovative educator, Jardine says he lived "in painful ways" when he taught in "eccentric and unusual ways" (2008, p. 82). He calls Lilith, Eve, and Pandora his

“foremothers in crime.” By doing so, he gives credence to the idea that resisting the norm indeed might be considered a criminal act. To act in a way that is out of the ordinary requires, “sticking our arms out of the institutional grave over and over again, steeling our minds and bodies against the blows that inevitably follow” (Idem.). But, he adds, “To win at the game of ‘ordinary,’ of subservience, obedience, and silence is to lose the very best of ourselves” (Idem.).

School founders may not be willing to lose the best of themselves anymore, even when they experience the pain resulting from “the blows” of critics and naysayers. But, they are not aiming to be rebels. They are not trying to be criminals. They are not acting extraordinarily to be feared, punished, criticized, and condemned. They simply have a different vision for education. Todd says simply, “I decided, ‘I gotta start my own school.’”

"Gotta." Got to. Have to. Must. These are the terms of obligation, not choice. Joe says, “I could not turn [down] the opportunity [to start a school].” By then, he could not imagine **not** starting a school and worried about having regrets if he refused and walked away. After "thinking about it and thinking about it," Mary found herself between educating her daughters alone at home and educating them alongside other children at a school she would create. Mary also gave in to a feeling of obligation and resigned herself to the idea of starting a school:

I had to make a decision. Either I’m going to homeschool again for a year or I’m going to start this school up and invite everyone to come and see what happens. [My husband and I]... decided let’s just embark on this adventure and see how far we can go.

Although she expresses her uncertainty as to how things might turn out - "see what happens" and "see how far we can go" - she ultimately started a school.

School founders “mind” a great deal. They mind that the schools they have access to are insufficient in some way. They mind being in lose-lose situations. They mind being accused of malicious subversion. Founders try to prepare themselves for the risks and dangers that lie in wait. They are bothered by the lack of support they receive in their quest to start a school. But, in the end, all this minding may be precisely what propels them to take action. They are aware, they dare, and they care.

Purpose

As their many ways of minding turn into obligation, school founders also are propelled by a sense of purpose. Kant writes, “The ability to set themselves any kind of purpose is what sets humans apart from animals” (as cited in Kappeler & Silk, 2010, p. 6). Aristotle adds that with every creative activity or pursuit, we aim at accomplishing something good, that we are goal-directed beings whose purpose is just as important as the fact of our being (350 B.C./1984). Nietzsche urges us to seek this purposeful life:

Why you, individual, exist, this ask yourself, and if no one can tell you, then try to justify the meaning of existence *a posteriori* by setting for yourself some purpose, some goal, some ‘therefore’, a high and noble ‘therefore’. (1876, p. 319)

As Nietzsche recommends, school founders set high goals for themselves and their schools. They want their schools to be “better,” in some way, than the schools they have rejected. Whether school founders see their goals as “noble” is less clear, although one mentions a desire to establish a more "principled" school amidst schools he deems less ethical.

Fred had an undergraduate degree from a top college, an MBA degree from a leading graduate business school, and a job with one of the most prestigious management consulting firms in the world when he started to plan Growth Academy. He says his experience with Gordon at St. Abernathy's never left him, and he felt a constant push to do something more meaningful. "I began to ask myself, 'What am I going to do when I grow up? What am I going to do that's going to be important?'" He wanted to be a "do-gooder" and a "Good Samaritan." He wanted to contribute something meaningful to the world. Mary says about the experience of planning her school, "I knew I had a purpose. I knew there was a purpose in it, [even when I wasn't] being very productive."

The Broadway musical "Avenue Q" is a 2002 coming-of-age story about a group of young adults seeking their "purpose" in life. Along the way, they face real-world problems with uncertain solutions and outcomes typical of their age and stage. The show features an entire song entitled "Purpose," excerpted here:

I'm gonna find my purpose
I'm gonna find it
What will it be? Where will it be?
My purpose in life is a mystery
Gotta find my purpose
Gotta find me
(Marx & Lopez, 2003, retrieved from
<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/avenueq/purpose.htm>)

As the lyrics suggest, we all "gotta" find our purpose. We feel obligated to use our minds to find our individual purpose and to build on shared intentionality. We are lost without a purpose, without a way to collaborate with others to work toward mutually agreed upon societal goals. Kappeler and Silk (2010) note that purposeful activity is generated by, and perpetuated by, our system of language-based teaching. As such, we might be lost

without our schools, since they teach us to have a purpose in the world, and teach us what we need to know to realize that purpose.

In this chapter, I have offered a thematic rendering of my conversations with school founders in an attempt to reach beneath the essence of the experience of starting a school. I introduced the participants in the study, and described how they found gaps in the educational landscape that they then sought to fill with their unique vision of a school. While living in the gap, stuck between unacceptable options, school founders experience a profound sense of nothingness and loneliness. An innate desire to close the gap with their own educational offering motivates them to “mind” the gap and dare to take the risks associated with starting a school.

Starting a school is not a calling for school founders. They start schools out of an obligation to care for and develop other people’s children. They do this by offering children an education they cannot find elsewhere that the school founder feels is needed. For school founders, starting a school provides a profound sense of purpose as they forge ahead despite the risks, the obstacles, the warnings of others, the lack of support, and the seemingly ubiquitous resistance of naysayers.

Chapter 5 begins with a few overarching questions about education in a quote by school founder Dan Greenberg. The chapter then encapsulates the most salient educational tensions brought forward by this study, tensions that point to where being “in-between” two places might lead as we ponder Greenberg’s questions. After a brief introduction to the chapter, I bring forward the most prominent tensions, as I weave some of the literature and my own insights around each one. I also recommend that we as

educators revisit these tensions with open eyes, an understanding of the changing world in which we reside, and an enhanced mindfulness.

CHAPTER 5:

MINDFULNESS IN EDUCATION: ADDRESSING COMPETING TENSIONS

Every thinking educator has grappled with the basic questions that have dogged the profession from earliest times: What is the best way to teach, or to learn? What subjects should children learn? ... How should schools be run in a democratic society? (Greenberg, 1995, p.1)

American educators have been grappling with these questions for more than a century now. Will we ever have definitive answers, or is education a constantly moving target that requires us to plan less and improvise more, as if trying to catch falling leaves? The phenomenological process encourages us to look beyond our assumptions and pre-understandings, to reflect on “the unexpected” (van Manen, 2007), and to free ourselves to consider new answers to persistent questions and new solutions to the educational challenges we face. By reconsidering, in a re-mindful way, some of the tensions that presented themselves in this study, perhaps new educational approaches might lead to the improvement of educational possibilities for our young people.

What school founders¹² do is to implement unique answers to the questions posed above. They imagine schools that do not yet exist and then attempt to make those dreams a reality. Like phenomenologists, they question what seems obvious, and stir up ideas that seem settled. They interrogate the taken-for-granted. They “think outside the box,” using the very practice Thomas Friedman says we should pass along to our children so they can maintain their parents’ standard of living as we enter an increasingly knowledge-driven economy (Friedman, 2005). What possibilities do the school founders’ fresh looks at accepted doctrines allow us to see? And what tensions arise again, tensions that may have been discussed for years without significant resolve?

¹² Recall that I am referring to the school founders in this study, not all school founders.

New Answers to Old Tensions

What is the best way to teach, or to learn? What subjects should children learn? ... Occasionally, a group of people, uninhibited by tradition, asks these questions – and proposes radical new answers, in a “hothouse” setting for all of us to see. Such experiments are especially valuable in providing a completely fresh look at accepted doctrines, and helping us try new ones.
(Greenberg, 1995, p. 1)

In addition to identifying possible aspects of the essence of the experience of starting a school, this study has uncovered a number of educational tensions that, while not necessarily new, are unresolved or in need of reconsideration. The study brought forward various complexities inherent in education and schools, and a list of difficult conundrums that still face schools of all kinds. Each conundrum consists of a tension, such as the tension between providing a new educational option for students and providing students with *access* to that option, or the tension between spending taxpayer dollars on starting new schools versus reforming existing schools.

The conundrums presented in this chapter include what a label of “new” or “old” means and does to a school, the tension around who decides which values we transmit to our children and how, how we should determine the “success” of a school, and how we find the right balance between what has “worked” in the past for schools and what will “work” in the future. While these tensions have been discussed before, perhaps a mindful collaboration between a diverse group of public school officials and school founders might generate innovative solutions to some of our more recalcitrant educational challenges.

The tension between new and old will be the focus of the first section of this chapter. The second section discusses the important issue of values in the creation of a

new educational institution and how values manifest themselves in schools. The third section explores tensions arising around school quality by addressing the oft-asked question, “Are these new schools any good? which then begs the question, “How do we know if a school is successful?” This is followed by a look at the reality of change in the world and the need for schools to continually respond to change. Finally, I reflect upon my own growth as an educator as a result of this process.

The New/Old Tension

Perhaps the highest-level tension the school founders’ actions highlight is our understanding of the differences between so-called “new” and so-called “old” schools. What distinguishes a “new” school from an “old” school and what might we learn from this? This first tension includes the tendency to draw a dichotomy between old and new schools as if there were a line in the middle of the old-to-new spectrum neatly dividing it into two sides. In reality, schools fall somewhere along the spectrum, not just at one end or the other, and their placement thereon, in turn, affects how we think about “traditional” (or “old”) and “modern” (or “new”) schools.

Every time a school founder opens a new school, s/he offers the educational landscape another educational option with its own level of quality and promise. This is not to say that starting new schools is a panacea to the challenges facing education today, but that new schools might present a different way to look at education. A new school offers, among other things, a unique combination of educational philosophy, pedagogy, academic and extracurricular offerings, and teaching methods. It has its own unique strengths and weaknesses as well. It is unlike any other school in existence, and its differences offer new possibilities to both students and educators.

Whether old or new, no two schools are identical. Every school is composed of a different subset of academic and extracurricular activities, a different location, different teachers, different students, and varying degrees of quality and depth. Like Tech, the school might focus on teaching interdisciplinary Science and on producing well-adjusted and emotionally satisfied students. Or like at Trinity Academy, the curriculum may include a focused study of the Bible. Growth Academy boards students overnight during the week and sends them home only on weekends.

The quality of facilities and teachers varies from school to school, too. While at one school, students might have excellent teachers, poorer schools may have fewer resources and more challenges, and not be able to attract the best teachers. While one school has an Olympic-sized swimming pool and a well-funded jazz band, another school may not have a pool or jazz band at all. Even parallel educational programs within the same school building, such as the science-focused Tech program which has a “regular” high school program operating alongside it, give students distinct educational opportunities and experiences. The students with whom Tech students take classes, the teachers who teach them, the classrooms and labs they use, and the courses they take are all different from those in the “regular” program in the same building. Each school has a unique profile, composed of a variety of elements that make it unlikely that any two schools could ever be exactly the same. Likewise, it is unlikely that any one school fits every child’s needs (more on this later).

Although it is not possible to start an *old* school, it is possible to create new schools that are meant to be (but, as noted above, cannot be) exact replicas of existing schools. While every school falls onto the spectrum between “a school unlike anything

ever known to man” and “an exact replica of an existing school,” it should be noted that this study did not include as participants schools founders who converted, transformed, reformed, or renovated existing schools or those who created carbon copies of pre-existing schools, such as might be the case in school reform or school system expansion endeavors.

The school founders in this study did not make minor changes to a school by tinkering around its edges. Rather, they started unique, innovative institutions that, in many ways, stand in stark contrast to the other schools available to the students they serve. They accomplished this by implementing alternative educational philosophies, curricula, and/or teaching methods that stand alone in the educational landscape. Their schools are what Weil (2000) calls “start-ups (new schools that would not otherwise exist)” (p. 7) with what school founder Clint Wilkins describes as, “a type of education that [is] different from that already available...an alternative to what [is] there in the community” (as cited in McConaghy, 2006, p. 118). Interestingly, Arendt refers to these new schools as “miracles,” since they are established against the overwhelming odds of “statistical laws” and their “infinite improbability” (1968, p. 169), giving new answers to old questions.

The hermeneutic process provides an interesting parallel to the work of school founders in that both highlight what is new in the world in the midst of the old. Jardine writes, “It is precisely the abundance or overflow of the new *in the midst of this old and experienced (and often deaf and stupid and violent) world* that is its concern” (his emphasis, 2006, p. 150). It is the complicated meeting of old and new that set the stage

for everything we experience, and the meaning of the words *old* and *new* have important implications for life, education, and change.

An early title for this dissertation was “The Lived Experience of Starting a New School.” It became apparent, however, that it is redundant to say that a school founder starts a *new* school. Every school someone *starts* is by definition *new*. In 2005, Georgia Gwinnett College (GCC) was called “a school so brand, spanking new it got its name and logo less than five months ago” (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 124). This is one way to define “new.” But, more to the point, the first President of GCC says the school is truly unique and different, “driven only by our imagination...starting from ground zero” (Rasmussen, p. 124). It is possible that this starting “from ground zero” might make a new school more like new wine than old wine poured into new bottles. Unique features of a new school might be worth looking into more deeply and mindfully to see how they “play out” over time, and how they compare to existing alternatives.

New Good, Old Bad

What is the best way to teach, or to learn? What subjects should children learn? ... Occasionally, a group of people, uninhibited by tradition, asks these questions – and proposes radical new answers, in a “hothouse” setting for all of us to see. Such experiments are especially valuable in providing a completely fresh look at accepted doctrines, and helping us try new ones.
(Greenberg, 1995, p. 1)

The commitment that underlies a school founder’s desire to continue to build a new school is the commitment to develop young people in the best way the school founder can. In the process of doing so, school founders provide us with a new look at generally accepted educational practices. Greenberg encourages us to find “new answers” and to use new “doctrines” to guide future educational decisions and practices.

As a school founder himself, Greenberg assumes educators are (or should be) dissatisfied with the status quo, and insinuates that something “new” would likely be an improvement. This is a bit of a leap, however, since every new educational approach cannot be better than what we have currently, unless our schools are so malfunctioning that they could not possibly get worse. The literature on charter schools shows this, too – some charter schools are not an improvement over existing schools. Others are. Indeed, many school start-ups fail even before the school opens. Others fail later.

Furthermore, any new school may be interpreted as standing in critique of the schools that exist. School founders all report having had conversations with well-meaning individuals who see their starting a school as a damnation of existing schools. “Why are you starting a new school?” they hear from the naysayers and others. “Our schools are great. Are you saying they are not great? Are you saying they are terrible? How dare you.” Ashley Del Sole, the spokeswoman for a charter school application to the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland echoes this sentiment: “I think there’s a thought that if MCPS allows charter schools in the system, that it indicates the school system is [a] failure, but,” she adds, “it only shows that it’s a place to allow for innovation and potential new ways of educating children” (Samuels, 2011, p. B3).

This is not to say that proposed programs or schools are vetoed simply because they criticize existing programs or point out embarrassing gaps in the system. Proposing something new also ignites a discussion about how a school system allocates limited public resources. The tension here lies partly around how much the school system should spend on old, faithful programs, and on new, untested ones. Resource allocation decisions are in most cases political and made by elected officials. “There is no way of

avoiding a political decision” (Gutman, 1987, p. xi) about the content and distribution of educational resources and educational authority. Per pupil spending and the distribution of resources therefore varies from school to school, creating a tension between wealthier and less wealthy districts. No matter the type of school, where its resources come from inevitably influences their allocation.

The school founders participating in this study started two private and two public schools. But, no matter what type of school they started, none of the school founders seemed focused, especially in the early part of the process, on the question of resource allocation. The two public schools (a charter school and a school-within-a-school) soon bumped up against the funding conundrum, and had to apply for public funding. While the charter school fought for public resources, none of the others did. Instead of analyzing how the public school system allocates its resources, and trying to compete for them, all four schools looked to philanthropies and outside sources of funding to finance their operations. None of the school founders were overly focused on finances; rather, they were being consumed by the difficult job of working against tradition to implement their vision with fidelity. None were more interested in criticizing existing schools than on creating the type of school they wanted to create. This laser-like focus on the implementation of their philosophy over and above the practicalities of implementation, along with the reluctance of the public school system to share its resources with new schools, makes school founders especially vulnerable to financial duress or failure.

In the quotation above, Greenberg further asserts that there are people “uninhibited by tradition” who can objectively reform schools. Is that really possible? Is it possible to eliminate all “bad, old” ideas from our thinking and have only “new, good”

ones? And are all new ideas necessarily good? While school founders may have dreams and visions that go beyond generally accepted norms, it is difficult to imagine a school founder who has not been influenced in countless ways by the educational culture in which s/he was raised. Every school founder has a history – a family history, an educational history, and a history as an adult in our society. Their histories cannot be expunged, and so they inevitably shape the school founder’s philosophy, agency, and behavior. “The past rests like a dead weight on the shoulders of the future” (Arnowitz, 1991, p. 8). One would have to live life under a rock to be “uninhibited by tradition.”

The Power of Words

Not only do our personal histories influence our educational thinking, but they also affect the words we choose to describe that thinking: old and new, conservative and progressive, traditional and innovative. “Ideological terms such as ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ may be two of the most effective labels by which the old educational ideas continue to sustain themselves,” writes E.D. Hirsch (1996, p. 8). Hirsch, a strong conservative voice and an advocate of the technical approach (Grundy, 1987) embedded in his “Great Books” curriculum, asserts that the educational community leans toward “terminological polarization and intellectual caricature” that allows us to maintain the intellectual status quo and pit “modern” educational reform against the “traditional evil empire” (p. 8). He defends certain aspects of “traditional” schooling and criticizes “modern” schooling saying, “If parents were told that...the so-called ‘untraditional,’ or ‘modern,’ mode of education so dominant in our schools has coincided with the decline of academic competencies among our students, they might be less eager to embrace the failed techniques characterized as ‘modern’” (1996, p. 9). Though Hirsch warns us not to

fall into the trap of identifying schools as either traditional or progressive, he then asserts that “traditional” schools use a “knowledge-based approach” that the “most advanced nations” employ, but that American schools have wrongly “eschewed” for the past fifty years (1996, p. 9).

We must be careful not to lump “new” schools into a category also called “modern.” School founders generally start schools *in reaction to* existing schools, not to replicate them, but this does not mean every aspect of a new school is new. And while each school founder has a unique dream for his or her school, a vision comprised of a unique combination of elements, these features contribute to the “newness” and uniqueness of the school on varying levels and to varying degrees. Some *new* schools contain elements one might consider quite “traditional” - desks in rows, teacher at front, children sorted by age. Not every element of a new school is “modern,” “new,” or different. Conversely, not every element of an “old” school is “traditional.”

If we add “postmodern” to the mix, we might stand all labeling on its head. Like “traditional” and “modern” education, “postmodern” education is extraordinarily difficult to define. It is “not really a system of ideas and concepts...rather, it is complex and multiform and resists reductive and simplistic explanation” (Usher, 1994, p. 1). It is described as “more of a state of mind” and a different way of seeing matters of race, gender, emancipation and oppression than it is a “fixed body of ideas” around those topics (Usher, 1994, p. 2). Usher writes, “Although it is customary to define what one is writing about in the case of ‘postmodernism,’ this is neither entirely possible nor entirely desirable” (p. 6). It is no more useful to play the “modern versus postmodern game” (Usher, p. 4) than it is to play the “traditional” versus “modern” game. The dichotomies

of traditional versus modern and old versus new have the potential to distract us from a deeper and more meaningful analysis of the educational landscape. All schools fall somewhere along the continuum between these terms and are much more nuanced than either term alone can convey.

Part of the tension here is that our terminology fails us by limiting our understanding of the complexity of educational situations. Schools are complicated institutions, complete with complex histories, recalcitrant ghosts, and many moving parts. Some of the moving parts are under the school's control, while others are not. There are, therefore, many places in which things can go wrong, and many aspects of schools that are open to critique.

The institution we call "school" is what it is because we made it that way. If it is irrelevant, as Marshall McLuhan says; if it shields children from reality, as Norbert Weiner says; if it educates for obsolescence, as John Gardner says; if it does not develop intelligence, as Jerome Bruner says; if it is based on fear, as John Holt says; if it avoids the promotion of significant learnings, as Carl Rogers says; if it induces alienation, as Paul Goodman says; if it punishes creativity and independence, as Edgar Friedenberg says; if, in short, it is not doing what needs to be done, it can be changed; it *must* be changed...[These men] believe that the human situation is improvable through intelligent innovation. They are all courageous and imaginative thinkers, which means they are beyond the constricting intimidation of conventional assumptions. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. xv)

As Postman and Weingartner suggest, many "believe that the human situation is improvable through intelligent innovation." There is promise in the new. So much is expected of education today that we must get "beyond the constricting intimidation of conventional assumptions" and change our schools if we hope to meet those expectations. An even more dangerous risk is that the educational system will calcify and "wear out" if

it remains closed to new ideas and to change (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 204). So, no matter what, we must embrace and implement, new idea by new idea, those changes that will improve the broader educational system.

Change and the Brand New

By now, I hope it is clear that existing schools should not change just for the sake of changing, because change is not always “better.” In addition, they cannot simply change in words on paper. Finally, they cannot change too much or too fast since that can compromise the effects of the change. In the end, what matters more than the philosophy, rhetoric, and labels we attach to a school is what actually occurs at the school on the ground floor on a daily basis. What matters is what is taught, how it is taught, and how successfully students and teachers accomplish their learning together. What matters is how easily and effectively a school can change to meet the ever-changing needs of its ever-changing students in this ever-changing world (Friedman, 2005). Arendt writes, “Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings...and we destroy everything if we try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate...Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into the old world” (1969, pp. 192-193).

This “newness,” then, needs to be incorporated carefully to preserve the delicate balance between change and tradition. If schools change constantly, in what Arendt calls an “onslaught” (1969), teachers may be perpetually frazzled and never reach a point of stable proficiency. Unable to improve slowly and carefully over many years, they will burn themselves out by questioning and reinventing practices too frequently. New ideas

signal “a potential danger to the community: the danger of a relentless, unbridled onslaught of change” (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 208). Teachers embrace shiny new technologies, methodologies and programs, then watch helplessly as each one peaks, then disappears in what they call “the pendulum swing” (Jardine et al., 2003a, p. 91). Jardine adds, “It is easy to become discouraged with this cycle of failure” (Idem.). Unless we ask new questions, all that will happen in the name of educational reform is that the schools of the future will drag longer, more burdensome shackles” (Idem.). What we really need to do to improve the educational experience for our children is to eliminate the shackles altogether.

By creating schools that are “brand new,” school founders are able to avoid, to some extent, the burdensome shackles and outdated traditions that haunt existing public charter and private schools. Though it is impossible to start with a *tabula rasa*, school founders have a unique opportunity to demonstrate to the educational community a completely different way of educating young people, and the chance to shift prevailing beliefs about schools and education. Daniel Greenberg, founder of the private Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts calls his school “a hotbed of rugged individualism,” and a unique and disarming place (Greenberg, 1995, p. 11):

To most people, school conveys a whole picture – classrooms, desks, kids and teachers sitting in classes, lunchrooms, bells, and so forth...[This] place doesn't look or feel like a school at all. The standard “school cues” are missing. It looks more like a home, with many persons going about their varied activities in a determined, yet relaxed, manner. The furniture, the people, and the ambience are not what one might expect to find. Visitors often feel baffled; they look for what they are used to seeing in schools, and don't encounter it here. (p. 164, 8)

Part of what gives these new schools the opportunity to change our minds about schools and education is this element of surprise, this gap between what we expect and what we see and feel when we find ourselves in a truly “different” school. By its very nature, the cognitive dissonance we experience draws us in as “baffled” observers and causes us to question, compare, and critique our assumptions about schools and schooling. Some will simply dismiss the wacky, new school as just that - a wacky, new school, and possibly even insist that it is not a school at all. Others might learn something new, something that has the potential to change their educational perspective or practice in a significant way.

Finally, in thinking about the tensions between the terms “new” and “old,” we must be mindful of the fact that what is “new” today will be “old” tomorrow. With time, a *new* school and everything about it becomes familiar to the point at which it is no longer considered new. The newfangled, “wacky” school of today becomes the “familiar” or “traditional” school of tomorrow. The amount of time this takes varies, of course; there is no magical formula or line drawn on the calendar to mark the change from new to old. How new something is is merely a matter of degree. Acknowledging this, one school founder says: “We were not interested in being or remaining unique” (Greenberg, 1995, p. 163). Indeed, the school founders I engaged with expressed the same sentiment, and I have yet to come across a school founder who would be unhappy if his or her brand of school became “old news” or “the norm.” Indeed, school founders feel confirmed when their schools are accepted by a wider public after months (or years) of skepticism and criticism.

The tension between what is new and what is old creates an arbitrary and unnecessary divisiveness in education today. The terminology itself is problematic, as is the assumed simplicity of what is actually a very complex situation. In addition, there is the impossibility of divorcing ourselves from our past (and everything “old”), and the overwhelming fear of having too much “new” thrown at us at once. Not to mention that everything that is new today will one day be old. In order to move forward as educators, it might be productive to use these words (new and old, traditional and innovative) sparingly and carefully. Instead of trying to label everything in education as either new or old and fighting for one or the other as if it exists in solitude, perhaps it would be better to turn our attention to larger educational goals. But, what are those larger goals?

The “Basic Values” Tension

What, how, and by whom should our children be educated? Amy Gutman (1987) suggests this is an age-old educational question that requires a new answer. The tension arises when we attempt to identify the basic values we have as a country and a corresponding way in which to pass them along to our children. Our country is no longer the predominantly Western European, Judeo-Christian, agriculture-based, provincial country it was in the 20th century. Our demographics have changed, our needs have changed, and our values have changed. Where education was once considered a public good, it is now more often considered a private good (Gutman, 1987).

Is the teaching of values important to us as a country? The short answer is yes. Harvard Professor Tony Wagner writes, “When the public talks about ‘education reform,’ they are at least as concerned about values as they are about academics” (Wagner, 2002, p. 10). But, you might ask, shouldn’t values be taught by parents? Wagner answers this

question as well by stating that, while virtually every community with which he has worked believes parents are the first and best teachers of values, he believes basic values should be reinforced by our schools.

But, *which* values? According to Neil Postman (1995), American schools used to have shared values such as family honor, restraint, social responsibility, humility and empathy, but those values have been replaced with what he refers to as the “gods” of consumerism, economic utility, technology and separatism. A study done by the Public Agenda Foundation (1994) arrived at the following list: honesty, respect, equality, fairness and getting along. The public also supports the transmission of traits typically called “life skills,” and instilling in children a strong “work ethic” (Wagner, 2002, p. 10). College professors and employers say students should graduate from high school with more *motivation, curiosity and respect* (Wagner, 2002). Jardine (2003a) adds:

Imagine if we treated *these* things as the basics of teaching and learning: relation, ancestry, commitment, participation, interdependence, longing, desire, conversation, memory, place, topography, tradition, inheritance, experience, identity, difference, renewal, generativity, intergenerationality, discipline, care, strengthening, attention, devotion, transformation, character. Imagine if we treated as *basic* to teaching and leaning [sic] listening openly and generously to each other, not just to a healthy and sane understanding of other, but also of oneself. (p. xiii)

As evidenced by the above lists of values and by my work experience visiting schools across the country, there is no widespread agreement about what values we want our children to have, let alone how those values might be taught. Gutman contributes “deliberation” to the list of values we should teach, and writes, “There is...no consensus on even teaching the ‘basics’” (p. 5), nor is there consensus around who should determine

the values we teach our children. Nevertheless, schools and teachers, by virtue of their daily interaction with, and influence over, young children, model certain values every day. The transmission of these values can be conscious or unconscious, but occurs nonetheless.

Schools vary in their transparency with regard to what they value. Some may not even be aware of what they value or of the values they are presenting to students. Only careful observation of their day-to-day behavior is sufficient to uncover the values by which they actually live and work. Other schools have carefully written values statements they follow conscientiously and their values permeate the culture of the school. Still others have carefully written values statements they largely ignore or at least fail to implement.

The school founders in this study reveal that they value creativity and innovation, along with a collective passion for developing children. These values underpin the essence of their schools, and are an important prerequisite to, and influence on, the learning that goes on in their schools. It seems that innovation has the potential to more easily take root in a brand new school, allowing for a learning environment focused more on the overall development of students than on the transmission of subject matter.

Each of the school founders in this study mentioned particular non-academic values as very important to their school, or as the *most important* reason they started a school in the first place. The founders' values reveal themselves in their choice of faculty, curriculum, and nearly every other aspect of the school's operations. For example, at the highest level, Todd values preparing children for the future with "relevant, transferable skills." Mary values a strong religious grounding; Joe values the

joyous interdisciplinary learning of science and math, and Fred values educational equity. This is not to say that these are the *only* things they value, but that these values stand at the core of their educational philosophy and reveal themselves in a variety of ways throughout their schools.

In my years as an educator, I have seen many schools in which teaching subject matter is a central value, and a focus on developing children more broadly is curiously absent. At those schools, there is often an emphasis on obedience, memorization, and/or a robotic level of attention to detail. Sadly, none of these qualities are found on the wish lists of values written by educators or business leaders. Yesterday, my son was lamenting the fact that one of his teachers spends much of every class period trying to get his 40 students to be quiet: “I hate the teachers who are [mostly] concerned with getting the class quiet. If they’d just teach us with passion, we’d be quiet.” What the teacher is teaching in this class is how to be blindly obedient no matter what the circumstances. John Gatto (2005) writes at length about these aspects of what he calls the “hidden curriculum” in our schools, and recommends that we mindfully evaluate and replace values that do not contribute to a relevant and compassionate focus on *developing* children, something school founders are nicely positioned to do, but that staff in existing schools find extremely difficult to do.

For the most part, school founders have the freedom to decide which values their school will live by and teach. And while this freedom inevitably leads to the creation of schools with values not everyone shares (such as the religious teachings at Trinity Academy), all schools should not have to teach the same values either. Our schools should be equitable, but do not need to be identical. Wagner (2002) supports this

philosophy by strongly suggesting that the naming of specific values to be taught in schools should not be done at the state or national level.

While there is danger in allowing local or school control over values (where a majority might discriminate against a minority), it is also possible that the only way to provide every student with an appropriate education is to offer a patchwork of different schools to educate the wide variety of children on which our collective future depends. As such, it might be useful for schools to consider engaging all members of a community (children, parents, educators, and employers) in an open-minded *dialogue* (not a debate) to determine the values they hold dear and to implement those values mindfully in the educational system. The questions then revolve around which schools and which values children have access to, and how successful those schools are at transmitting values and developing children. The matter of access will be addressed later in this work; the matter of evaluation (measuring success) is addressed in the following section.

The Evaluation/Success Tension

Inherent in the values and goals for public schools, public charter schools, and private schools is a tension around how they determine and evaluate their success. A question I have been asked repeatedly while conducting this research is, “How good are these new schools? Are they successful?” Although answering this question was not the primary focus of the study, it is a legitimate one, and it has arisen frequently enough to warrant some attention. The question of school quality naturally leads us to entertain other age-old questions and tensions, such as how to assess learning, how to define a school’s “success,” and how we might evaluate schools such that the results can be used for school improvement.

Each school founder in this study had a particular dream or vision when s/he started a school. To bring the dream to fruition, each needed to secure upfront philosophical and financial support to operate their schools. Each had to convince parents, teachers, and potential financial supporters that the school was going to be successful. This element of marketing the philosophy, curriculum, and expected outcomes of a school is unique to the experience of starting a public charter or private school. “Regular” public schools follow district and state mandates with regard to curricula and assessment, and do not need to “market” themselves since students are assigned to their schools based on local zoning policies and other criteria. As such, “regular” public schools do not have to prove they will be successful before they are opened, and existing public schools receive financial support, students, and teachers based on enrollment without having to predict future success.

In order to attract the resources they need, school founders must concretize their vision, describe their goals, and predict their success to the satisfaction of potential constituents before they even open their doors. This process is difficult for them (how do you evaluate an idea?), and they accomplish it to varying degrees, but the difficulty in no way absolves them from trying their best to predict their school’s future outcomes based on little more than a vision. Once open, each new public charter or private school needs to find a way to show progress toward its stated goals or run the risk of going out of business.

Existing Evaluation and Reform

In the United States, public schools are financed by local taxpayers and managed by locally elected or appointed officials. Values, priorities, and educational philosophies

are established at the local level. While historically we have had local curricula, too, the new Common Core State Standards are in the process of being adopted by all but five states (VA, NE, TX, MN, and AK) (<http://www.ascd.org/common-core-state-standards/common-core-state-standards-adoption-map.aspx>). Similarly, we have not had a national exam all students must take to graduate from high school. The closest we have come to that would be the Stanford 9's, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the SAT, and the ACT, but these tests have never been mandatory nationwide. The new Common Core State Standards have generated two assessments that purport to be aligned to the standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which are currently undergoing "wide-scale field tests" (Brown, 2014, p. B4).

For the moment, in public and private schools, there are still a wide variety of assessments used to show student progress, including grades based on teacher-developed tests and quizzes, and county- or state-specific standardized tests. Private schools, which do not have to follow government mandates with regard to student evaluation, might never use the same evaluation methods as the public schools. Depending upon the charter agreement, public charter schools may or may not be required to follow the assessment policies of the non-charter public schools. This nationwide decentralization of our schools, and the fact that private and public charter schools do not have to follow all public school policies, has meant that ten different schools may have ten different values and goals, ten different curricula, and ten different measures of success. This makes it difficult to determine if one school is "more successful" than another.

No Child Left Behind was the federal mandate that required standardized testing of K-12 students in all schools nationwide, with a goal of “proficient” students and “qualified” teachers in every school by 2014. The mandate did not require schools to use a particular standardized test to demonstrate their success, however. Instead, each state was given the authority to develop its own rubrics and tests and to define its own measures of academic proficiency and progress (Sunderman et al., 2005). These were to be state-specific tests that aligned with state curricula, but could really be in any form at all.

Despite the variety of options available and the freedom to evaluate progress in their own way, however, most schools still use some form of standardized paper and pencil test as a measure of learning. Even at the public charter school Growth Academy, Fred has implemented pre- and post-Stanford-9 tests of reading and math in an attempt to demonstrate, in a more acceptable way, that his students accomplished more than one year of academic progress in their first year of operation. This use of standardized tests to evaluate schools increased with the advent of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and, subsequently, with the competition for Race to the Top (RTTT) funds.

More recently, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments being developed alongside the Common Core State Standards continue the standardized testing trend, but are unique in several respects. Both are tied to a curriculum that is being adopted widely nationwide. Both attempt to measure critical thinking skills in addition to rote memorization. Both require students to write essays and short answer questions in addition to answering multiple choice questions, and both are computer-based. The Smarter Balanced assessment is also adaptive, meaning that it presents a harder question

if a student answers a question correctly, and an easier question if the student answers it incorrectly.

Testing Limits and Alternative Assessments

It should be noted here that there is a tension between holding schools accountable to educate children and the limits of high-stakes standardized tests to do so. Opponents of standardized testing argue that testing children does not help them learn anymore than taking a child's temperature helps alleviate a fever. Diane Ravitch, the former Assistant Secretary of Education, notes that empirical evidence "shows clearly that...accountability as [an] education reform [lever is] not working" as hoped (Ravitch, 2010, retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/14/opinion/la-oe-ravitch14-2010mar14>). Testing does not "fix" the situation or in any way ensure that children who are failing (or being failed) subsequently receive a better education. "Education Secretary Arne Duncan...estimates that 82 percent of America's schools could fail to meet education goals set by No Child Left Behind" (Department of Education, retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/duncan-says-82-percent-americas-schools-could-fail-under-nclb-year>). Palmer adds that NCLB has "done much to undermine teacher morale and *stifle* real teaching and learning" (my emphasis) (2007, p. xiii). According to a series of studies by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, NCLB spawned a high-stakes testing culture that led to increased dropout rates and encouraged a "teach-to-the-test" approach in the classroom (Wagner, 2002, p. 7). Teachers' unions and educators argue that standardized tests are inaccurate, unreliable, and have not worked well in the past. Others object to the federal control NCLB, RTTT, and the Common

Core imposes on local schools, emphasizing our long-held belief that the federal government should not influence local schools (Quaid, 2010).

The point here is not to criticize the assessment tools we have used in the past. As mentioned previously, it is difficult to compare schools that have different values and definitions of success. But, it is also not to suggest that we give up trying to assess educational outcomes due to the difficulties, criticisms, and unintended consequences of doing so. If school founders open schools that fail, the public should know and learn from that. If their schools succeed, the public should know and learn from that, too.

What was reilluminated by this study is that evaluating students, teachers, and schools is a complex process, and there is no single proven, agreed-upon method or measure for doing so. In the current climate of high-stakes testing and predominantly quantitative common accountability measures, and on the cusp of the implementation of Common Core State Standards, it seems unlikely that taxpayer-funded public schools are in a position to be more creative in their assessment practices. Nevertheless, it is important for educators to learn from the implementation of NCLB and RTTT and to mindfully design educational reforms and accompanying assessments that will show us with the greatest confidence whether a new teaching method, school structure, or curriculum contributes positively to student learning.

Evaluating student and school progress is of particular salience to school founders. In order to know whether their students are gaining the knowledge and skills the school is attempting to impart, their evaluation process must be both appropriate and credible.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to creating [radically new] schools has been the inability to “prove” that all students were learning and to hold schools accountable. In a world where much more is expected of students and schools,

new approaches to education have to demonstrate that they can get better results. And if educators who create these schools do not believe the standardized tests in use today assess what they are teaching, then they must create new approaches to assessing students' skills. (Wagner, 2002, p. 61)

As Wagner suggests, new and different educational methods may require new and different ways of evaluating learning. As new schools are created and existing schools are reformed, existing evaluation methods may not be relevant anymore. Yet, school founders feel pressure to demonstrate success in “traditional,” socially acceptable and understandable ways in order to gain support for their schools. Founders have the added challenge of having to predict school outcomes based on nothing but a vision in order to attract teachers, students, and financial support for their school. One school founder, now in Year 4, navigates the tension between counseling students to apply to “right-fit” colleges and counseling them to apply to “highly ranked” colleges, saying he will “play the college admissions game” only until a couple of students are admitted to “highly ranked” colleges. At that point, the school will have proven itself using a widely accepted measure of success – admission of students to “top-ranked” colleges – and will then be free to implement its own unique measures of student success. Even then, however, the school will still need to address the pressure from parents and college admissions offices to provide acceptable measures of student success.

The creativity and freedom with which school founders design schools carries over into the novel ways they evaluate their educational success. None of the school founders in this study, public or private, spoke of feeling constrained by existing evaluation criteria or standardized tests. All are implementing unconventional methods to evaluate their school's success. Private schools have the most freedom in their

evaluation design, while public charter schools follow most public school policies, and schools-within-a-school (such as Tech) usually follow public mandates. The school founders in this study are all developing evaluation methods aligned with their unique approach to education. For instance, Century Academy, a private school, does not give tests, homework, or grades on a regular basis. Instead, the school sends parents written reports every month to describe student progress on measures such as “failing forward” and “having a growth mindset.” The tension arises when they are expected to measure their school’s success using generally accepted methods that do not fit with the goals or philosophy they have for their school and students.

Some of the unconventional outcomes school founders (and others) value, and the unconventional methods they use to determine student progress, may give us pause. But, they also might provide insight into new ways to think about educational assessment and evaluation. For example, Joe’s “smile index” at Tech does not in its current form satisfy the statistically desirable requirements of a valid, reliable, and objective assessment. As a public school-within-a-school, Tech must assess students in whatever way the state requires. What is interesting to think about, however, is *why Joe considers student happiness to be a vital measure of how his school is doing*. Why does he take the pulse of his school by counting the number of students in the hall who are smiling? Perhaps Joe suspects that the emotional health of his students impacts their ability to learn. So, while perhaps not a valid, reliable, or comprehensive summative measure of success, Joe’s “smile index” is an inexpensive, easy way for him to get indirect, formative feedback every day.

At the public charter school Growth Academy, Fred must comply with all state-mandated assessments required by law. But, like Joe, he goes beyond simply giving standardized tests of content knowledge to assess student progress. Instead, he compares the behavior of his students to their peers on the Center for Disease Control's measures of physical fights, cigarette use, alcohol consumption, and the use of illicit substances. Fred wants to be able to show that Growth Academy students fight, smoke, use drugs and drink alcohol **less** than their peers. Fred also uses self-designed evaluations to track students' self-esteem and satisfaction with their teachers. These are unusual and novel measures of student success, measures that are far easier for school founders to implement than for existing school leaders to introduce. Not only is it difficult for existing schools to change their evaluation methods and tools, but it is also difficult for them to change the criteria they use to demonstrate success.

The diverse ways in which school founders think about the success of their programs highlights how, most often, the success or failure of a student, teacher, class, or school is determined by a score on a single test of content knowledge. This is especially true in the public school system, where giving a standardized, content-heavy test is most efficient. It costs less, consumes less of a student's learning time, and is easier to use to compare results across schools. As a result, we find ourselves "at a time when tests and test scores not only drive instruction in the classroom but also play a key role in determining how teachers and principals are judged and whether schools are considered successes or failures" (Brown, 2014, p. B1). The tension here is that, while standardized tests of content knowledge may be efficient, they are no longer a sufficient evaluation

strategy, and their continued use perpetuates an evaluation culture that does not work in the best interests of education. The National Academy of Education reports:

At root here is a fundamental dilemma. Those personal qualities that we hold dear – resilience and courage in the face of stress, a sense of craft in our work, a commitment to justice and caring in our social relationships, a dedication to advancing the public good in our communal life – are exceedingly difficult to assess. And so...we are apt to measure what we can, and eventually come to value what is measured over what is...unmeasured. (in Rothstein, 2004, p. 97)

At the secondary and higher education levels, new models of educational evaluation have been emerging slowly, including so-called “authentic assessment” approaches being developed and promoted as alternatives to “single-sitting” measures. These alternative evaluations attempt to capture more difficult and complex intellectual skills, such as experimental design proficiency and analytical skills (Coyne et al., 2009). Instead of, or in addition to, standardized tests, educators use rubrics to assess student writing, end-of-year presentations (Bagley, 2010), or ePortfolios, which purport to provide an in-depth, long-term look at student achievement along a wide spectrum of skills and abilities (Banta, 2009). In my own work, I have designed and re-designed creative ways to evaluate student interest in, and attitudes toward, science – characteristics thought to correlate with persistence in science learning.

Although there is no one method for evaluating schools, there are generally accepted criteria for evaluating students and schools that permeate the American educational culture. These evaluations tend to be more quantitative in nature, and we are taught that they should be as valid, reliable, and objective as possible, with minimal bias (Cronbach, 1971; Joint Information Systems Committee, 2012; Moskal & Leydens, 2000;

and Yu, 2005). Due to the wide variety of values, goals, and contexts that exist within our schools, however, it can be difficult to design quantitative or qualitative evaluation criteria and methods that can be disseminated to other schools without additional tailoring at each new site. As a science education grantmaker for 11 years, my colleagues and I tried several times to create a single evaluation tool for science education initiatives we were funding around the country. The effort was only partly successful due to the widely disparate goals and the variety of projects involved. At one point, it became clear we were trying to find a way to compare the quality and success of “apples to oranges.” While we never found a single method to track the progress of all the projects we were supporting, we were able to offer *multiple* means of evaluating them, including a list of *ten* possible overarching goals and many acceptable ways to demonstrate a project’s progress toward those goals (Felix et al., 2004). By triangulating the results of several measures of success, it proved easier for our grantees to obtain a useful picture of the progress of their programs.

The Difficult to Measure

Ideally, schools will evaluate what they value philosophically using tools and methods aligned with those values. As alluded to above, another tension in evaluation that came up repeatedly in my conversations with school founders is the struggle school officials have with easier-to-measure and more-difficult-to-measure outcomes. Palmer suggests we should determine the weights and measures of accountability in education “under three conditions that are not being met today:”

We need to make sure (1) that we measure things worth measuring in the context of authentic education, where rote learning counts for little; (2) that we know how to measure what we set out to measure; and (3) that we attach no more

importance to measurable things than we attach to things
equally or more important that elude our instruments.
(2007, p. xiii)

Setting aside the possibility that some might push back on Palmer's assertion that "rote learning counts for little" (Hirsch, 1996), Palmer's conditions are worthy of consideration. Measure things worth measuring, measure what you set out to measure, and find ways to measure outcomes that currently "elude our instruments," provided they are worth measuring.

The third of Palmer's conditions nicely highlights the tension between basing an evaluation on easily quantifiable elements, and basing it on elements that are more difficult to evaluate quantitatively. As Wagner suggests, "Test results tell us very little about the qualities of mind and heart that matter most for success and happiness in adult life" (Wagner, 2002, p. 11). Rothstein adds, "Character traits like perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, punctuality, communication skills, social responsibility, and the ability to work with others and resolve conflicts...are important goals of public education; in some respects, they may be more important than academic outcomes" (2004, p. 6). But, they are harder to measure.

Palmer (2007) adds that schools might look beyond *student* outcomes to consider *qualitative* measures of *teachers and schools* that indicate effective teaching and learning. These include a teacher's "self-knowledge," "passion," "heart," and "capacity for connectedness," and a school's "circle of trust," characteristics Palmer has shown to be correlated with educational success. He advocates for taking care of teachers so they can better take care of their students, and asks, "How can the teacher's selfhood become a

legitimate topic in education and in our public dialogues on education reform?” (p. 3).
Indeed, if something is not evaluated, it is far less likely to be discussed.

Palmer recommends that schools evaluate teacher identity and integrity as a part of their assessment, since these qualities have been shown to be important indicators of good teaching: “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2007, p. 154). To uncover elements such as these, new methods of evaluation must be developed. To capture valid information, many of these new assessments need to be qualitative and open-minded as opposed to quantitative and tightly controlled. At the same time, they must meet the taxpayer’s scrutiny, as the taxpayer expects his dollars to be used to make education more effective and efficient. The tension lies in trying to justify doing both – capturing hard-to-assess knowledge and skills (often using qualitative methods) and, at the same time, continuing to give widely accepted, state-mandated and standardized tests.

New ways to evaluate students, teachers, and schools using qualitative measures potentially could be useful to all schools. The 17 members of the Learning First Alliance are addressing the lack of qualitative measures of educational success. In a statement made in 2009, (retrieved from <http://www.learningfirst.org/sites/default/files/assets/LFAPrinciplesMeasuringTurnaroundSuccess.pdf>), the group suggests that teams of educators conduct site visits to schools to collect qualitative information that will inform continuous improvement efforts:

Quantitative measures of school improvement are critical, but by themselves they do not offer enough information to guide the improvement process. Schools would also benefit from the judgments of informed observers who witness

turnaround efforts first hand. Site visits to schools by trained teams of state and local educators and community leaders are essential to identifying which schools need to be turned around, what strategies should be used to turn them around, and whether turnaround schools and their students are making progress towards clearly-established goals for improvement. Well-designed site visits prompt school staff, communities and outside experts to collaborate on identifying and addressing school and student needs.

Site visits can help identify causes of insufficient progress and promote mid-course corrections in the turnaround process. They can also provide an important check against manipulation of quantitative measures through strategies such as excessive test preparation or manipulation of school climate data. Site visits should be designed first and foremost to support the turnaround process rather than to shame or punish struggling schools.

The development of reliable performance measures for turnaround schools will require intensive collaboration among policymakers, educators and communities.

Perhaps peer clusters composed of a policymaker, a community member, an educator from a public school, and a school founder (from any type of school) would form an especially strong team to evaluate schools and suggest improvements.

There is another tension operating here. There is a fine line between spending too much and too little (time and money) gathering evaluation data. It is easier and cheaper to give a standardized, multiple-choice test than to evaluate more qualitative elements such as student engagement, a love of learning, self-esteem and effort. As a science education grantmaker, I regularly conducted site visits to see what my grantees were doing. The time and expense of traveling to their place of work and spending a day or two there was more than justified by what I learned about those programs and the context within which they were trying to work (the Program Director died, Hurricane Katrina destroyed the educational center, program staff are not getting along, the school system is

on its third Superintendent in five years, etc.). The unquantifiable contextual information I absorbed from site visits was consistent with what the Learning First Alliance describes in the above quotation. Perhaps the greatest hope we can have for education in America is that organizations like these will continue to collaborate to develop and disseminate methods and tools that can *appropriately and fully* capture the many levels of progress of our schools and show schools how to *use* the results to improve in meaningful ways.

Open-Minded Evaluation

The challenge for school founders, then, is *to identify their goals clearly* and then either adopt or develop evaluation tools and methods that capture most fully the outcomes to which they aspire. I would propose that a school founder's focus should not be on one particular goal or another. Every school has its own goals. Whatever goals they choose, those goals should be clear to everyone, and the evaluation method used should identify criteria that, when measured, will demonstrate how well they are progressing toward those goals.

Subsequent to that, it is important for school founders to use the results of their evaluation to find ways to more effectively reach their goals. In order to do this, the knowledge, skills, values, and habits of mind school founders want students to have when they *leave* the school ought to be clear from the first days of planning the school:

Comprehensive accountability planning—defining, measuring, and reporting student and school achievement—is a critical responsibility that school founders, to their great disadvantage, too often fail to undertake seriously from the beginning of [their] planning. (Berman, 2007, p. 135)

Part of the creation of a new school from scratch should include a discussion of the goals of the school and how the school's progress will be evaluated. The school's goals should

be transparent and its measures of success should be aligned with those goals. Founders need to keep in mind that appropriate, credible tools might not yet exist. Joe's "smile index" is a good example of this.

It can also be helpful to know where challenges might be addressed to improve school progress. Once school founders have reliable and accurate formative assessments, they can use the results to inform changes that will enhance the educational experience and outcomes for as many students as possible.

All schools need to be mindful of how they evaluate themselves, and should periodically revisit their evaluation tools and methods. In my experience, too many continue to rely solely on standardized tests to demonstrate "student success." In the spirit of mindful open-mindedness, Montgomery County Superintendent of Schools Joshua Starr spoke at length on November 11, 2013 ("State of the Schools" presentation at The Music Center at Strathmore in Rockville, MD) about how the school system needs to "welcome change" and "embrace the new," including developing multi-faceted evaluations that measure students' creative problem-solving skills and their social and emotional growth. The school system's current emphasis on assessments that measure only academic content knowledge, he said, does not appropriately motivate teachers to educate students in areas he deems critical, namely the areas of creative problem-solving skills, social skills, and emotional health. Meanwhile, public school systems all across the country are adopting the Common Core Standards and the accompanying computer-based assessments. A tension school founders will face in the future will be how much to employ, or not employ, the Common Core and its accompanying assessments. The tension for school founders is to decide if they will "toe the line" and employ "generally

accepted” evaluation tools and methods or develop and adopt their own and accept that the naysayers (and others) might dismiss their less conventional measures of success.

The Tension of Implementation

It should be noted that mindfully designed assessments can offer useful information about student progress only if they are implemented with fidelity (American Psychological Association, 2010). Teachers will teach to any test, as the common saying, “What’s measured is treasured” suggests. The challenge in evaluating educational progress is not so much that we lack alternative evaluation systems or that we cannot create new assessments to evaluate the student progress we want to effect. The challenge lies in changing a well-entrenched culture that does not change easily, and therefore does not readily try new methods of evaluation (even proven ones) in its schools. Despite a stated desire in many educational circles to develop students’ social, emotional, and cooperation skills, for example, I have yet to come across a teacher, let alone an entire school, that regularly evaluates students on their social and emotional progress and their ability to work cooperatively with diverse groups of peers. Admittedly, current federal and state accountability policies make this type of assessment prohibitive.

As a case in point, I spent last year as a half-time AP environmental science teacher at a self-proclaimed “progressive” private school whose written mission includes graduating students skilled at teamwork, cooperation, and working with diverse groups of people. I was thrilled to be in a place where I could encourage these skills and find creative ways to determine whether students got better at them over the course of the year. Sadly, both teaching and evaluating students was a complete failure at the point of implementation because I was actively discouraged from teaching those very skills. On

day two, I was leading students through an exercise designed to help them get to know each other better so they might work more productively in teams. A student asked me in a frustrated tone, “When are we going to learn stuff?” Three months later, my supervisor told me to eliminate what she called “enrichment activities,” and asked me to “teach more traditionally.” She said the students were unaccustomed to inquiry teaching methods, group work, field work, preparing and giving presentations, keeping portfolios of work, and reading books that were not textbooks. Students had complained that, by asking them to prepare and deliver presentations, I was not teaching them; they were “teaching each other.” They would feel better, my supervisor continued, if I just taught them the content in a more direct way and gave them more “traditional” tests and homework assignments.

The tension in this situation for both my supervisor and my students had to do with their distrust in the new, their inability to imagine that learning in an unfamiliar way would be successful for them. This was coupled with a fear that, if they did not learn the “stuff” asked about on the AP exam, they might earn a lower score on the test, making them less attractive to the top-ranked colleges to which the school and their parents expected them to apply. This underlying goal of admission to top-ranked colleges, coupled with the school’s perception that there is only one way to accomplish it, clearly outweighed the school’s goal of graduating students skilled in teamwork, cooperation, and working with diverse groups of people. The tension for me rested between doing what I thought would be better for students in the long run and caving to their short-term desires and lack of faith that a different way of learning could prepare them simultaneously for the AP exam. Feeling sick about it nearly every day after that, I lectured at the students more, and gave them more traditional assignments and exams. They didn’t like it, and I am

quite sure they learned less (and remember less now) than they would have had we stayed the course, but they did not complain.

Changing the culture of schools and conditioning students to “be” students differently is critical to the implementation of new educational methods and assessments. It just is not possible to change a school **and** keep everything the way it was. And having a list of goals, as this school did, and the desire to change is not enough. As Caprice Young, former President of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, says simply, “Good intentions and noble ideas are not enough” (in Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 1). But, if private schools cannot implement needed changes, how can much more restricted public schools do it? In order to accomplish extraordinary change, teachers, administrators, elected officials, students, and *parents* all need to do their part to agree on goals and then implement the programs, habits, and resources needed to accomplish them. In addition, state and federal policies must be entered into the equation. It does no good to declare a goal that no one is committed to meeting and that the school has no intention of supporting financially or otherwise. Changing a well-entrenched culture is difficult enough without the added burden of hidden obstacles.

Change is an all-hands-on-deck effort. In an explanation as to why I should teach my class the way it had been “successfully” taught in the past, I was informed that parents were paying a hefty tuition to ensure that their children did well on the AP exam. These parents had seen students do well on the exam in prior years, and therefore trusted the methods used to ensure their children’s success. No one wants their child to be the guinea pig for “new” methods.

Parents are a vitally important player in the education enterprise. Without parental buy-in, the implementation of any change affecting students can be slowed or halted altogether. In my experience, parents are also often the most neglected part of the equation, and sometimes the hardest group to reach and educate. For many parents, an understanding of school is based on what it was like for them as students years ago in a different world and, in some cases, in a different country (which they may have left *because* the schools were not good). Whenever involving parents requires resources of any kind, there is the added tension (again) of how a school or school system allocates its finite resources. Nonetheless, parents must be engaged in mindful ways, as they have a profound impact on the educational culture at home, the family's attitude toward education, and what the family expects from its children's schools.

Parent Involvement Tensions

Parents are, by law, ultimately responsible for ensuring their children receive an education, and most parents care deeply about their children and what schools do to, and for, them. Parents also have a significant positive impact on their children's success in school. Across 50 studies evaluated in 2009, "parental involvement was positively associated with achievement" (Hill, p. 740), both academically and socially (Henderson, 1987; Jenyes, 2003). And Mel Levine (1994) suggests that the best "educational care" for students takes place when educators form a coalition with parents.

When successful school founder Deborah Meier designed Central Park East High School in New York City, she carefully included a variety of ways in which parents could intersect with the school (Meier, 1996). In most school systems, however, parents are welcomed less and become less involved in their children's education as they age. Rare

is the school that asks parents for input into what is taught or how it is taught in their children's schools. Yes, there are Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA's) nationwide that have varying degrees of influence on local schools, but they are rarely *asked* to make decisions about what goes on at the school. Most often, the PTA is steered in the direction of raising money for the school, while the power to make important decisions or changes to the school rests in the hands of "school trustees, government persons, curriculum developers, school district personnel, and school principals" (Common, 1981, p. 80). Notice that the bastion of influence Common describes does not include either teachers or parents.

The Power of Parents

School founders who have children of their own cannot help but start schools that consider the type of education they want for their own children. This plays out in the goals for the school, the subjects taught, how they are taught, and many of the school's policies. Though none of the schools in this study were established by like-minded groups of parents dissatisfied with their educational options, many new schools are. It might be worth exploring the differences between schools founded by parents and non-parents, and how schools founded by parents whose own children will attend the school differ from schools that do not enroll the founder's children.

Given that parents are a child's primary teachers, it is clear that they positively impact achievement, and they ultimately are responsible for their children's education, perhaps schools might invite them more often to complement, inform and evaluate what they (schools) do. Policymakers might consider including more deliberately, and weighing more heavily, what parents value and want their children to learn, how the

school might provide that education and evaluate student progress, and what parents think about the overall job the school is doing for their children. In a *Huffington Post* article, “Role of Parents in Education,” Dr. Alexis Lauricella writes, “It would be ideal if teachers and school administrators facilitated and encouraged parent involvement” of all kinds (2011, retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alexis-lauricella/role-of-parents-in-educat_b_955716.html).

Parents’ evaluations of a school, taken together with other forms of evaluation, could provide an important perspective on education. Furthermore, asking parents what they value and how they think the school is doing in those areas is likely to make parents feel more engaged in their children’s education and could provide qualitative information to consider in the spirit of continuous school improvement. In addition, engaged parents might continuously provide schools with critical feedback about what their children do and say at home that could enhance their learning at school. Educational consultant Vicki Cobb writes:

One of the best schools I have ever visited is Robert D. Cummings Elementary in Alief, Texas. Principal Patty Chandler sums up a way you can continually assess your child's school. “Your child's attitude is one of the best indicators as to whether the school is meeting his or her needs. Effective teaching techniques at the correct level of instruction should result in a child who has a positive self-concept, is interested in school, and is becoming an independent thinker.” Your child's enthusiasm for school and for learning is perhaps your most important touchstone in judging a school's quality. (2010, retrieved from <http://www.vickicobb.com/testschool.html>)

But, how many schools ask parents to provide them with feedback on “your child’s attitude” and “your child’s enthusiasm for school”? Schools can only know what goals

parents have for their children, what criteria they believe should be used to measure their children's progress, and how their children are doing if they *ask*.

Silent Parents

Parents generally are not being consulted about the education of their children, or about the impact of the educational system on their children. In 2011, the Family Engagement in Education Act was introduced to provide incentives for schools and districts to engage parents more in their children's education, but it did not pass. Anthony Esolen, in writing about the development and adoption of the new Common Core, laments the lack of parental input in the process:

The promoters of the Common Core do not consider that the parents are their employers. The parents have had and are to have nothing to say about it. They are “good” if they submit, and “problematic” if they don't. No one has asked them their opinions about a decent education. No one ever does. Imagine if the same principals were to say... We are your delegates, and we welcome your direction. (2013, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2013/12/11651/>)

Esolen asserts that parents are never invited to share their thoughts about what constitutes a quality education for their children.

The school founders in this study were no more likely to seek parental input in the formation of their schools than existing schools. None of the school founders talked about parental involvement in the design and rollout of their schools. It did not seem that a wide variety of potential parents were consulted in the design of any of the schools. The most frequent engagement parents seemed to have with emerging schools was in their role as naysayers and critics, which may explain why school founders did not include them more in the development of their schools. But, it is the omission of any

discussion of parents or of the role they were expected to play in new schools that is notable. Interested parents simply were not included in the earliest stages of the design of these schools. Only Joe mentioned parents in our conversations, and only to say that his first parents were his “pioneers,” the risk-takers, the parents willing to enroll their children in an utterly unproven school. Perhaps it is precisely the fact that school founders are able to ignore the disparate desires, philosophies, and critiques of parents that allows them to have a laser-like focus on their goals. Nonetheless, I can’t help but wonder how these schools would have been different if parents had been included in the school design process from the start. Would (or do) parents derail the progress of the school founder, sometimes to the point of failure to open? How are schools opened by groups of parents different?

Since the opening of Century Academy, parents have formed a PTA, and many parents volunteer at the school. But, there is still no proactive effort on the part of the school to involve parents. Growth Academy takes the lack of parental involvement a step further. The structure of the school does the opposite of encouraging parental involvement by *taking children away from their families*. A public charter school, Growth provides room and board to its students during the week; students return home only on weekends. In my own work, I have seen schools give up on involving parents due to language barriers and the difficulty in finding times when parents are free to be present.

From time to time, groups of parents who have been ignored rise up and make their voices heard. Today, this can be done with the support of social media and websites such as GreatSchools.com, where parents can vent their frustrations with their schools or

laud them as they see fit. Websites such as Moveon.org that gather like-minded citizens together to electronically sign petitions, are also giving parents a collective voice. Last fall in Montgomery County, Maryland, I was part of an effort that saw over 10,000 parents sign a petition calling for later start times for our high schools.

As with most tensions, there is a delicate balance to be found in the inclusion of parents in their children's education. In this case, the tension lies between involving parents appropriately in their children's education and allowing them to dictate school policy. There seems to be no danger of the latter in the founders' schools, and parents do not seem to be overstepping boundaries in most school systems. Instead, they seem conspicuously absent from the discussions their schools are having. What all of this suggests is that there should be a reawakening of both discussion and creative action among educators in order for schools to mindfully and proactively educate parents and harness the feedback and positive contributions they have the potential to make to the educational process. New and existing schools need parents, and parents need access to their children's schools.

The Access Tension

As Fred thought about how to give underserved children access to an education that would give them wider options after graduation, he sought to solve some of the challenges they faced - the touchpoints of failure looming large in their lives. Fred could see that, for the children in his target group to excel academically, the distance to a strong school, the impact of a deleterious home environment, the lack of professional role models in the community, a lack of high expectations, and other cultural and socioeconomic differences were serious obstacles that would need to be overcome. By

starting his school, Fred sought to provide these children with access to a superior educational option that, unlike other public schools, was able to break down most of the external barriers preventing them from receiving a good education. The school operates 24-hours a day from Monday through Friday, and children live, eat their meals, and are taught, tutored and mentored there. They go home to visit their families only on weekends. Expectations are high - the staff expects every student to go on to college even though most of their parents did not do so. Because the school is a public charter school, children attend free of charge, but the school does not have the same constraints as other public schools in the district, so students receive a very different education than they would at their local public school. The tension here is one of access, since not every child who wants to attend Growth Academy can. There simply aren't enough spaces and resources to accommodate the hundreds of children whose names appear in the lottery for spaces each year. When Growth opened, it highlighted in a very public way, the need for more schools like it, and the ongoing tension surrounding access to a free and appropriate education for every child.

The Myth of the Free and Appropriate Education

By law, every public school system must provide a free and appropriate education to every school-aged child living within its designated boundaries. However, given the many ways in which it is difficult for this promise to be fulfilled within the current public school system, maybe access to a “free and appropriate” education for every child is an impossible goal.

First of all, an education is never really “free.” Among other things, schools require funding for facilities, teachers, equipment and supplies. We all pay for those

when we pay our taxes. Due to the local control of schools, this means that rich districts with a higher tax base have more extensive resources than poorer districts, and children who live in wealthier districts, therefore, have access to greater resources than their poorer peers. Elected officials decide what percentage of the overall resources to allocate to public schools. Rich districts are then better able to provide a plethora of educational options for families than poorer ones. Another cost of education is opportunity cost. For every tax dollar our elected officials allocate to education, there is an opportunity cost since that dollar cannot be spent on anything else. Private schools are not free, either. Except for the few that can accept vouchers, private schools do not receive funding from the state or local government and so generally require parents to pay tuition to cover the expenses of running the school. In short, regardless of whether a student attends a public, public charter or private school, their education is never really “free.”

In order to get the most *appropriate* education, every child would need to have access to a “right-fit” school – a school that is appropriate for that particular child. However, in the spirit of efficiency and equal opportunity, public schools typically provide a “one-size-fits-all” education to all the children in their zone. So, many children do not have access to an “appropriate” education within the public school system. But, the “one-size” approach is admittedly efficient in several ways. It is cheaper and easier to provide a single curriculum for all students, one accompanying professional development program for teachers, and one standardized test by which to assess student progress. In terms of providing an equal opportunity to every child, having one program allows the school to say, in all honesty, that it is providing the “same” education for every child, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other factor.

Our nation's charge to the public school system is to give children a set of basic skills, such as how to read, write, and add two-digit numbers. Anything beyond providing that state-determined minimum level of knowledge and skill is not required. Wagner writes, "All we have ever done – or tried to do – was give a majority of students a very basic education – at about a sixth-grade level" (Wagner, 2002, p. 9). Nowhere in our education laws or policies does it state that schools are required to do anything more than that. It has not been the goal of public education to provide every student with access to the *most appropriate* educational opportunities for him or her, nor has it been a goal to *maximize the potential* of every student. The problem is that the "one-size-fits-all" educational approach works well for some children, but for many others is not a "right fit" at all. Recall that it is precisely this gap that converts ordinary people into school founders who start new schools.

As the American education system was forming, William Chauncy Langdon questioned the right of the state to take parents out of the education equation and institutionalize and standardize education for all children. He wrote, "Real education is the development of distinct personalities," and therefore cannot "be effected by contract or in the aggregate" (1889, p. 28). Most experienced educators know this - that one 5 year-old learns to read easily using a phonics approach while another does better using a whole language approach, and a third will not be ready to read for another year. One child learns better sitting still in a quiet place while another needs to move around. Every child has his or her own distinctive type of intelligence, often referred to as a "learning style," which dictates how that child learns best (Gardner, 1983).

These differences in children's abilities and styles should not be surprising, especially the variability in students' "readiness" to learn certain concepts and skills. We would not give a teacher a roomful of 12-month old children and then hand her a curriculum that orders her to teach them all how to walk on the first day of school. Some children will already be walking and will waste a day during which time they could have been learning something else. Some children will make some level of progress on that day. Still others will not be ready to walk for weeks or months no matter what the teacher (or anyone else) does on that day. We would not give failing grades to children who cannot walk at the end of the day, and we would not fire a teacher if all of her students are not walking by the end of the day. Langdon writes that parents are keenly aware of the need for schools to treat each of their children differently: "No true and fully competent parents, united in the education of their children, would ever think of acting on the tacit assumption that there were no other than bodily differences between their sons and their daughters" (1889, p. 28).

And yet, we lump kindergartners together and give their teachers well-defined curricula every year, with the justification that children are "basically alike" at the same age, and become even more "alike" as they grow older. It turns out that that the opposite is true; individual differences do not disappear as children age, they actually become more pronounced. "Especially as children become adolescents, their learning interests and needs become highly differentiated" (Wagner, 2002, p. 116). And yet, a standardized curriculum expects students to be equally interested and equally ready to learn a particular concept on a particular day.

Wagner adds, “The reason why ‘one-size-*doesn’t*-fit-all’ in schools is because students and their families vary greatly in their interests, needs, and – most important – the ways that children learn” (my emphasis) (Wagner, 2002, p. 115). Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1983) and Mel Levine’s theory on educational care (1994) also convey, in abundant detail, the nature and extent of individual learning differences.

The tension here lies partly with the fact that creating distinct schools to meet individual children’s and families’ needs is expected to be prohibitively expensive or would necessitate trades – closing one program to open another. Imagine the political and resource distribution nightmare that would be created by a mandate to do so. In most districts, there are already too many schools competing for a piece of the fiscal pie. Montgomery County, Maryland’s 150,000 student system has attempted to address the issue by creating a variety of “programs” within schools that purport to target particular groups of students, such as the “highly gifted” or the “learning disabled.” The system also has interest-based high school programs within existing schools focused on, for example, math and science, the International Baccalaureate program, AP courses, technical skills, and communications. But, the number of unique schools or programs a district can afford and how many students have access to them still are serious limitations to providing “right-fit” programs for every student.

At Century Academy, Todd addresses this tension by providing a school that does not exist in the district. The school allows students to learn in any way they want and at a pace that is comfortable for them. For example, all Century Academy math classes are self-paced. Each child’s math achievement is assessed when they arrive at the school and

s/he is given a customized curriculum based on what s/he already knows. Children use a variety of methods to learn math, from working alone on a workbook to working with a teacher one-on-one or in a small group, to watching Khan Academy lessons online, to working on problems with a friend. If students need to listen to music while they work, they listen to music while they work. If they need to walk around for awhile then sit in a beanbag chair, they do that. As long as they are learning, Todd says, he is satisfied. He tells students, “We don’t care how you learn, just learn in the way you learn best.”

Consistent with public education’s charge to educate *all* children, access to more flexible and diverse educational options can only be seen as a benefit to society as a whole. And while there are certainly school systems that have implemented diverse educational options, it is still the case that large groups of children are not getting an appropriate education, particularly poor and minority students. “Historically, our schools have never provided equal opportunities to the poor and minority populations in this country” (Wagner, 2002, p. 10).

Given the overwhelming evidence that poverty and cultural difference have a strong negative impact on school performance, poor and minority students often need and deserve more individualized attention to reach the level of citizenship and standard of living of their wealthier, majority peers. Growth Academy, Fred’s public charter school, was started precisely to address this issue. But, much more must be done to accommodate children who otherwise will continue to be overrepresented in our special education classes, lists of dropouts, and jails. The real challenge in all of this is how to do all of these things well, given limited resources and a mandate that only requires

schools to bring children to an arbitrarily defined level of “proficiency,” as measured in most cases by quantitative content exams.

Stephen Krashen provides what I consider to be a simple but brilliant and practical solution to this problem. His proposition could complement and inform, but not replace, the needed restructuring of schools to be more personalized and caring institutions of continuous innovation and relevance. He writes:

The solution to this situation could not be simpler: protect children from the effects of poverty, which means increase breakfast and lunch programs, improve health care (e.g. school nurses; see Berliner, “Poverty”) and improve support for libraries in high poverty areas. The source of funding is obvious: reduce testing. Keep only those tests that are truly useful and follow the principle of No Unnecessary Testing (NUT). (2013, p. 27)

Much can be learned from schools such as Growth Academy, which already is addressing these issues successfully. Growth offers students all of the support suggested above and more. As Krashen suggests, and Growth models, a school cannot do it alone. Freire adds that, because poverty is a socially constructed crime against humanity, we must address it by identifying the people responsible for changing the social construction, not by attempting to change the oppressed (1995, p. 379). Giving all children access to an appropriate education, as is their right by law, must be a group effort, involving citizens and institutions outside the school as well as those inside it. The tension lies in the reallocation of resources needed to both motivate people to start new schools to fill existing gaps in the educational landscape and to sustain any successful schools that result from their efforts.

Alternatively, if public schools could provide more flexibility at the school or classroom level, or at least among schools accessible to students, perhaps more children

could find a “right fit” environment in which to thrive. Unschooling expert Clark Aldrich says, “For me, the question is how do we create as much diversity as we can in education because the more diversity, the healthier the ecosystem” (Downey, 2011, p. A13). He goes on to assert that, “If homeschoolers and unschoolers can be incubators for new ideas, we may be able to introduce some of these new ideas back into traditional schools” (Idem.).

School systems might argue that this level of diversity is inefficient and impossibly expensive. And in order to function efficiently and claim to be “fair,” the system must offer a standard curriculum provided to year-of-birth classes of students. Others may argue that resource allocation is merely a matter of priority and, if customization of education were a priority, the money would be allocated to implement it. As an example of priority shifting, the college I attended as an undergraduate re-examined its priorities one year in order to free up funding for a new program. It managed to “create” significant financial resources by eliminating its football team. As my son Kazz pointed out yesterday with respect to changing our clocks for Daylight Savings time, “You can cut a strip of cloth from the top of a blanket and sew it to the bottom, but you still have the same sized blanket.”

Teachers often argue that they cannot individualize instruction in their classrooms to give every child an appropriate education given the widespread interests, needs, and abilities of the large groups of students in their classes, the curricular restrictions placed on them, and the way in which they are evaluated as teachers. In response to this, I would recommend a visit to a successful public or private Montessori School, where classes of 40 children between the ages of three and five work at their own pace in a

room with just one teacher and an assistant (often a trainee). It can be done. As much as possible, all students, not just Montessori students, should have access to a wide variety of free educational options that can be tailored to their interests, strengths, weaknesses, and needs. And, if one might argue that such a structure is age-appropriate only for young children, we must find ways to offer similar possibilities for older youth.

School Choice

We are in the middle of the college search process with my son. The variety of choices available to him is vast and, at times, overwhelming. Each college has its strengths, weaknesses, focus, personality, style, and unique features. My son also has his own strengths, weaknesses, areas of interest, personality and style. Fortunately, he has the freedom to apply to any college that seems like a good fit for him. Instead of having to attend the school he is “zoned for,” he can apply to a wide variety of colleges that might be a “right fit” for him based on his particular needs and desires. He really likes the idea of choosing a college that has the features he wants as opposed to being forced to attend a local one-size-fits-all school, as he does now. His teachers and guidance counselors tell him that most students are much happier in college, partly because they are able to select a school that is a good match for them and classes in which they are interested. Along with “fit,” the element of choice in education should not be underestimated.

The mere act of *choosing* a school boosts learning and motivates everyone who has chosen to be there to work harder (Wagner, 2000). Wagner writes, “[School choice] is a necessary precondition for the creation of a highly motivated learning community” (2002, p. 116). If not everyone wants to be at a particular school, he adds, it is

impossible to create a meaningful, relationship-driven school community. Wagner suggests we create a “greater diversity of public schools” to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse students:

We have freedom of choice of religion in our society. Why not in public education? One brand does not work for everyone in either case. Why give a choice of schools only to those who can afford it? An educationally compelling reason for school choice, then, is to create a greater diversity of public schools that are more reflective of the different needs, interests, and values of students and their families. (Wagner, 2002, p. 116)

To some extent, the increase in school choice in post-Katrina New Orleans has led to happier teachers and students. This is not to say there have not been problems with the rebuilding of the school system in New Orleans, but one positive outcome is that “Families have more choice about where their children can best succeed...and educators have more opportunity to choose a school that best aligns with their approach” (Armao, 2012, p. A19).

While school founders provide students and families with educational options that would not otherwise exist, not every child has access to these schools. Private schools charge tuition, which may prevent less wealthy families from attending. Century charges \$27,000 a year in tuition and fees, while Trinity asks for \$13,000. While Century offers financial aid such that several families attend the school free of charge, most families have to pay whatever the financial aid analysis expects they can pay.

Both public schools in this study, Growth and Tech, accept only a tiny percentage of their applicants. This causes enormous access issues. Although Tech is a “free” public school, it has rigorous selection criteria, including demonstrated excellence in math and science, high scores on an entrance exam, and positive teacher

recommendations. Growth Academy attracts hundreds more applicants every year to its annual lottery than the number of students it can accommodate. Furthermore, since there is only one Growth Academy and one Tech, some families live too far from the school and so they choose not to apply even if they feel it would be a good match for their child. Century Academy, a private school, has the same issue of being too far away for some families, but it has never rejected an applicant and has grown from 19 students in the first year to 77 today (Year 5).

A tension this study brings forward, then, is that providing an appropriate education for every child rather than the same education, while a laudable goal, would require every child to have *free access* to a wide variety of educational options. To increase the number of children who receive a truly free and appropriate education, perhaps it would help if policymakers made school variety and choice a priority. To provide students with access to an optimal mix of schools, research would need to be done to determine what combination of schools would most efficiently and effectively serve local students. School systems would need to set aside funds both for this research and for the later establishment of schools designed to fill gaps in the educational landscape. This is not simple, given the cultural, political and financial obstacles that would need to be overcome to divert funds, conduct research, and create new schools.

For the moment, then, our school systems might welcome and guide school founders who are finding ways, with or without full public funding, to create new schools. The creation of new schools should be supported as a positive contribution to the education community since every new school increases the probability of a “right-fit” environment for every child, and a window into innovative educational possibilities.

Policymakers might welcome the additional options these schools present to families and the window they provide into experimental educational environments. A public school teacher and administrator his entire life, Joe recommends that educators take “intelligent risks” by which the entire educational community can learn and develop.

If the world were never going to change again in any way, and every school were able to provide an excellent, free education to every unique child in its neighborhood, no one would write about the need to improve our schools. Since that is not the current state of affairs in education, school founders (and I) feel entitled to dream and to take steps to improve our schools and the educational system within which they operate. In my ideal world, everyone would have access to a plethora of free, diverse educational options. The greater the number of options, the greater the possibility that a family might find an appropriate educational “fit” for each of its children, with the additional requirement that funding for such choices would have to be greatly enhanced. As access to free and appropriate options increased, fewer families would have to sacrifice financially or expend time and energy “working the system” to provide their children with an appropriate education. The tension here again includes the matter of priorities and allocation of resources. For change to occur, there must be vision and political will. Once there is political will, a proposed change still needs to be made a priority, and this priority needs to translate into financial and other necessary forms of support. Without these, the changes we might make to our educational system are far less likely.

The Tension Surrounding Reform

With the rapid pace of technological change, and the changing demographics of American students, tomorrow’s adults will have grown up in, and will be living in, a very

different world than the one for which the public school system was designed. If schools wish to prepare children for their future, they must be willing to find a way to discard old practices and attitudes and replace them with practices and attitudes that will prepare children better for their future as adults. Some schools have been motivated to change their curricula and practices in substantial ways to prepare students for the world in which they will live, sometimes through teacher reform endeavors. Others seem “stuck” and inflexible, unable to keep up with these rapidly changing times. In her quest to reform schools into more caring institutions, Noddings notes, “It becomes clear that there is a challenge to care in schools. The structures of current schooling work against care, and at the same time, the need for care is perhaps greater than ever” (2005, p. 20). Structural changes are necessary, then, for schools to become the forward-looking influences on today’s children that our children deserve and our communities need.

Entrepreneurship in education is terribly important if we are going to realize educational excellence and equity, given the magnitude of the problems we are addressing... To be a successful [educator] in this context is to be a successful entrepreneur – to envision a reality many think is impossible, to pursue it with passion and relentlessness, to be extraordinarily resourceful. (Wendy Kopp, Founder of Teach for America, in an interview with The Kauffman Foundation on 1/6/11 at: <http://www.kauffman.org/what-we-do/articles/2013/06/scaling-up-teach-for-america>)

School founders undertake the long and arduous task of starting new schools with a dream in mind. Their dream is to start a school unlike any other that implements the values they hold dear and the elements they deem essential to a “good” education. By providing alternatives in education to local families, school founders contribute to the

educational enterprise in our communities. In addition to accepting, facilitating, and perhaps guiding the work of school founders, then, it might be valuable for our education leaders to study the operation and outcomes of new schools in order to disseminate any lessons learned to the broader educational system. Disseminating successful strategies and supporting schools who wish to implement them, is key.

Changing public education is, admittedly, a very difficult job. German economist Wolfgang Nowak once said, “Everyone wants change. At the same time, everybody does everything so things won’t change” (as quoted by Professor John Splaine on April 20, 2006 at the University of Maryland). In many cases, it seems impossible to change an existing school, especially when *significant* changes need to be made. “The central task we face is not to reform American public education, but to reinvent it – just as we had to do nearly one hundred years ago” (Wagner, 2002, p. 12). Tinkering at the edges will not be enough for most educational institutions; significant restructuring is necessary.

Our commitment to the current system is a huge impediment to the reinvention process as it renders us reluctant to make changes. Brafman and Brafman write:

We’ve all experienced the pervasive pull of commitment in some form or another; whether we’ve invested our time and money in a particular project or poured out energy into a doomed relationship, it’s difficult to let go even when things clearly aren’t working. As difficult as it can be to admit defeat, however, staying the course simply because of a past commitment hurts us in the long run. (2008, p. 30)

Our sentimental attachment to the educational system that nurtured us as children, the investment of ourselves, our parents, our teachers, and so much time and money make it difficult to throw out the system and replace it with something strange, untested and risky. Nearly fifty years ago, John Gardner, President of the Carnegie Corporation and

Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, described the forces that prevent us from revitalizing bureaucratic institutions. It is not that we lack ideas, he says:

There is usually no shortage of new ideas. [The problem is] breaking through the crusty rigidity and stubborn complacency of the status quo. [We] develop elaborate defenses against new ideas...[and] become more concerned with precedent and custom [and] how things are done [not] whether they are done. (As cited in Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 12)

Educational leaders are praised not for getting things done, but for understanding the rules and accepted practices of the field and conducting themselves in an appropriate manner. As repositories of “conventional assumptions and standard practices” (Postman & Weingartner), the educational bureaucracy has developed into a system that prevents change and promotes lethargy. “The powerful special-interest players in the public school system are hugely resistant to real change” (Izumi & Yan, 2005, pp. 5-6).

How, then, are we to change the structure and culture of some schools, the curricula of others, and the teaching methods of still others when “The body of custom, convention, and ‘reputable’ standards exercises such an oppressive effect on creative minds that new developments in a field often originate outside the area of respectable practice” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 12)? School founders tend to live in precisely that zone - “outside the area of respectable practice.” Recall the many people, critics and naysayers, who feel compelled to remind them of that. And yet, who better to turn to than individuals who look beyond the taken-for-granted, the a priori, the age-old agreed-upon practices to create new educational worlds? What “successful charter [school] principals and teachers are doing often runs completely contrary to the education establishment [and] shatter[s] the status quo orthodoxy” (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 5).

Postman supports these “subversive” schools and says they “serve as a kind of antibureaucracy bureaucracy, providing the young with a ‘What is it good for?’ perspective on its own society” (1969, p. 13). Some research on charter schools suggests their value as self-correcting models for success:

Unlike public schools, where low student achievement and ineffective teaching methods often go uncorrected for decades, charter [schools] must show results to stay open and attract students. If they don’t, they will go out of business... This allowance for failure ensures that only the better quality schools survive. (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 5)

Perhaps we can look to modern-day school founders to find innovations that are succeeding, and to predict which innovations will be effective even when disseminated broadly and far in the future. The school founders in this study are piloting innovative practices such as boarding students during the school week, teaching 105-minute long interdisciplinary classes, and basing their success on rarely measured or hard-to-measure criteria. Let’s learn from them.

Changing the Old

Is there no other way to effect change in education without starting new schools, as was argued in Chapter 2, or is it possible to change existing schools as the world changes around them? After all, starting new schools is a time-consuming, expensive and risky enterprise, and someday today’s “new” schools will be “old” and outdated if *they* are not able to adapt to the constantly changing times. So, while it may be more effective in some ways to start new schools than to try to reform existing ones, it is not feasible or financially possible to start schools from scratch every time the world changes. According to Tom Vander Ark of the Gates Foundation, “Creating new schools is good, but only reaches 5% of students. We have to find ways to dramatically change

existing schools” (2005, retrieved from http://www.edfunders.org/downloads/GFENewsletters/GFEFall05_Vander.pdf).

Starting new schools is not currently a sustainable model for continuous school improvement. Instead, or simultaneously, we need to infuse existing schools with a flexible, “change-based,” mindset that motivates and supports the entire school community to reinvent itself and then to improvise and change easily and continuously. This mindset must be a priority.

Jardine, Clifford and Friesen, who have implemented a “curriculum of abundance” where “lessons need not lessen from day to day” (2008, p. 30), argue that the place to implement change is with the education of the very young. They acknowledge the politics of the situation, and that some of their “questions may be uncomfortable to hear because they call into question much of what is currently recognized as sound professional practice” (2008, p. 12). But, they go on to say that all three of them arrived at the same conclusion independent of the others:

That attempts to reform schools by concentrating mainly on the attitudes and achievements of secondary students, or on the attitudes and achievements of those being hired to teach in schools, was unlikely to succeed. Each of us had already decided that the most promising place to create genuinely new practices was with the very young. (2008, p. 13)

In my own professional experience, I have seen dozens of schools and educators arrive at the same conclusion, that it is more effective to change educational practices beginning with educating the more malleable young in new ways rather than try to change the mindset and habits of older students and their teachers. As children grow up, then, new educational practices will move along with them. To this point, one school founder in this study originally planned to start a high school, but quickly found it was

difficult to “undo” what other schools and teachers had “done” to the students during the student’s first 14 years of life. This founder is now adding grades downward, one or two at a time, until the school includes preschoolers.

Wherever possible, detrimental bureaucratic constraints placed on the public school system should be relaxed in order to support change. Common Core State Standards, agreements with unions, demands made by colleges and employers, financial constraints, and education laws pose a variety of limitations on school administrators who might wish to reinvent their schools. All of these, and so many others, should be evaluated for their capacity to impede change. When District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson learned that the District’s less constrained charter schools had higher graduation rates and standardized test scores last year than the “regular” public schools, she said:

I sit here at this table and people tell me that charters are eating my lunch. If total freedom from union contracts and municipal regulations is helping charters succeed, why can’t I have the authority to do that, too? (*Washington Post*, July 3, 2013, p. B1)

Perhaps by appointing a team at the federal level to track and study the outcomes of young charter and private schools, it would be possible to determine which limitations impede change the most, and to find ways to modify these disabling structures and policies to make them less entrenched. “Lawmakers and educators need to realize what can be accomplished when educational freedom is used widely as the means to achieve high performance” (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 5).

Based on their thorough study of successful and unsuccessful charter schools, Izumi and Yan conclude that *freedom* is the key to school success (2005). Freedom on

all levels allows principals, teachers, students, and families to remain nimble enough to change as the world changes. Freedom allows them to preserve whatever works so as to not “throw out the baby with the bathwater.” Freedom has always been the key to successful homeschooling, unschooling, Sudbury and Montessori practices, which are able to provide students with substantially more flexible, individualized instruction than a typical public school. As has been mentioned already, parents feel more empowered and invested when allowed to choose the school their children attend, as this freedom allows them to choose a “best-fit” school for each child. Teachers are more successful in schools that match their educational philosophy, and will leave the school or even the entire field of education if they feel it is headed in the wrong direction. From their research on successful charter schools, Izumi and Yan conclude:

The chief reason charter schools are successful is very simple: freedom. Schools are free from micro-managing districts and meddling politicians. Principals are free to be leaders, not mid-level bureaucrats. Teachers are free to practice as professionals. Most important...students are free to learn. (2005, p. 7)

Even if we know all this, it is still hard for schools to change. Perhaps the hardest needle to move in the nation’s public schools is the well-entrenched, accepted *culture* of schooling to which the majority of Americans subscribe. But, in order to provide an appropriate education to today’s children, we simply cannot afford to, among other things, continue to sacrifice our children’s futures over the altar of nostalgia, lethargy, stubbornness, or ignorance. At the same time, we need to retain what is working well and what is still important to us. Wagner writes of this tension:

Indeed, the tug of war over school “reform” in this country today may, in reality, be a struggle between those who believe that the best way to deal with change is to cling to

remnants of the past and those who eagerly embrace the future.

But, that is a false choice. In fact, we have no choice. We must face the new challenges that change brings to education, while strengthening those values and institutions that are most important to us. Today's school reform efforts do neither. (Wagner, 2002, p. 11)

As Wagner notes, we must "face the new challenges that change brings to education."

There is no way to do this without making major changes to our schools, but changes must be made with respect to past successes.

Expunging the Old

Another part of the reform process requires that we eliminate recalcitrant, outdated practices, a difficult but important step. Lillard concludes in an understated way, "Envisioning how to eliminate ... such entrenched ideas is difficult" (2005, p. 3). To make matters worse, we have "perpetuated educational hoaxes that are difficult to uproot and have served as bases for misdirected efforts to produce change" (Myers & Simpson, 1998, p. 3). In other words, we have not only resisted change, but some of our choices have led reform efforts in precisely the opposite direction.

I suppose it is out of laziness that the world is the same day after day. Today it seemed to want to change. And then anything, anything could happen.
(Sartre, 1938/2007, p. 114)

Sartre asserts that once our educational leaders truly *want* to change the system, the possibilities are endless. Sartre also suggests that this is a larger issue than just "us;" the entire world is at stake. As a current political world leader and economic superpower, our country needs to remember that what we do in North America has implications for the rest of the world, and that developing countries look to us for direction. "We are that toward which the world is heading in its progress toward maturity" (Jardine et al., 2006,

p. 134). We must set a good example in this time David Frum calls the “adolescence of the human race. This is the moment when human beings are making the transition from a world governed by violence to a world governed by law” (as cited in Jardine et al., 2006, p. 134). Much is, indeed, at stake. Today’s educational leaders, therefore, need to articulate the reasons why change is imperative, evaluate their systems for both subtle and obvious impediments to change, embrace change, mindfully and creatively focus on implementing change, and reward change at every step along the way. School founders possess this desired mindset of change and innovation in education and have experience implementing their visions in today’s world. Perhaps we could consider their perspectives, wisdom, advice and experiences as we lead our school systems into the future.

On Becoming Mindful

To paraphrase Heidegger, the more important question is not: Can we do something with phenomenology? Rather, we should wonder: Can phenomenology, if we concern ourselves deeply with it, do something with us? (van Manen, 2007, p. 45)

Where do I begin to tell the story of how transformative this phenomenological journey has been for me? Using Tony Wagner’s terminology, the experience has not simply reformed me as an educator, it has reinvented me. Or, shall I say, it has allowed me to reinvent myself? Just like the journeys on which the participants in this study embarked, writing this dissertation was an entirely new and creative venture for me. Sometimes, I felt I’d entered the wilderness and faced every imaginable impediment, not unlike this description by Leonard:

Setting out in the wilderness of creativity takes enormous effort; it can be excruciating...If I want to climb a mountain peak or cross through dense forest to a hidden glade, I must prepare to face lightning storms and be ready to slog through muddy bogs on my way.
(2000, p. xiii)

Writing these pages has been humbling, exhilarating, anxiety-provoking, and yes, even excruciating at times.

I began this journey as a science educator and educational leader in search of the “perfect” school. I was sure that if the perfect school did not already exist, it could be created using data from the educational research. I thought there must be a perfect school somewhere in which all of the research was implemented with fidelity, creating the perfect learning environment for all children. If I could not find it, I thought, I would create it myself. I leave this process conceding that the idea of a perfect school is more of an impossible dream than a possibility. I have a completely new perspective on education.

I also walk away from this experience with a much greater respect for qualitative research, phenomenology, hermeneutics and the enormous contribution they make to our understanding of the world. “Doing” phenomenology has allowed me to learn more deeply, become more mindful, and have a heightened sense of perception. This makes sense to me when I read van Manen’s description of the difference between behavioral social science and phenomenological human science:

Traditional behavioral research leads to instrumental knowledge principles: useful techniques, managerial policies, and rules-for-acting. In contrast, phenomenological research gives us tactful thoughtfulness: situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding. (2007, p. 156)

I do find myself more likely than ever before to try to understand a situation in its fullness – its history, the current context, and its uniqueness. As a scientist, I value more than ever an *n* of 1. I am less impulsive and more mindful in my response to circumstances that used to easily ruffle my feathers. I have a more patient approach to pulling apart a situation in a quest for understanding before I take action. I approach both people and the world differently, more mindfully.

I appreciate that I can now look at a complex educational issue for just what it is – a complex issue – without having to boil it down into a controllable study that examines one variable at a time. As van Manen reminds us, “The fundamental thesis is that pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact are essential elements of pedagogic competence. But, we should be mindful as well that in everyday life circumstances, knowledge is like living: *things are always more complex!*” (2007, p. 156). I now realize that theories, models, and systems of action that provide a methodology or technique only shown to be effective in a predictable or controllable environment, are not sufficient for complex educational environments full of unique children. I have learned to be more mindful in every area of my life, a mindfulness that was not part of my previous vocabulary and practice. I keep in mind what van Manen wrote about incorporating lived experiences, philosophy, literary novels, poetry, art forms, and personal experiences into our action decisions: “One can strengthen the intimacy of the relation between knowledge and action by re-instating lived experience itself as a valid basis for practical action” (2007, p. 155). I am now more trusting of the phenomenological research process, more deliberate in my actions, and after hundreds of hours of thinking and writing, more careful in my choice of words. I am more aware that my actions and words, as well as my inaction and

silence, are modeling my state of being. I look for the underlying meaning in situations and words, and value the contribution this practice makes to my thinking, decision-making, and everyday way of being and living with others.

Finally, I leave this experience with enormous respect for school founders. I am awed by their many extraordinary talents, particularly their vision, creativity, and focus; the tenacity with which they build their schools from nothing against all odds; and the sacrifices they make to develop other people's children. They are inspirational, and I am a better person and educator for having known them.

APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Debra Felix
10224 Parkwood Drive
Kensington, MD 20895

July 2012

Dear Potential Participant,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that explores the experiences of individuals who have started their own school. I am conducting this study as a doctoral student in the Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership Department, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren.

The purpose of this interpretive study is to understand what it is like to conceive of and open a school. I will be exploring the fundamental question: **What is it like to start a school?** It is my hope that you will join me in a multifaceted journey to investigate the complexities of this question, as well as other questions that arise through our discussions and reflective writing.

To gain insight into the experiences you have had as the founder of a school, I will ask you to participate in approximately three individual conversations with me, between July 2012 and September 2012. I will audiotape and transcribe our conversations, keeping all tapes and transcriptions, as well as your identity, confidential. We will meet in mutually convenient locations at mutually convenient times to accomplish this. I will also request that you respond either orally or in writing to any additional questions or writing prompts I provide.

I am interested in setting up initial conversations for July 2012, and completing the study by the end of August 2012. If you would like more information, or would like to participate in the study, please contact me at dfelix@verizon.net, or (240) 305-4578. It is my hope that the insights brought forth by this research will be used to guide and inform the way in which school systems structure their own schools, how they approach charter school applications, and how they treat educators who open their own schools.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Debra A. Félix

Debra A. Felix

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Page 1 of 2

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title BUILDING A SCHOOL OF DREAMS: UNCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STARTING A SCHOOL

Why is this research being done? This is a research project being conducted by Debra Felix under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you have started your own school. The purpose of this research project is to explore the lived experience of individuals who have started new schools. We hope to better understand the complexities of such an undertaking to inform future school design and programming.

What will I be asked to do? The procedures involve participating in approximately three individual conversations for at least 60 minutes each, providing responses to a writing prompt, and responding to any follow-up queries and prompts. The study will begin in July 2012 and continue through September 2012. All conversations will be audiotaped and transcribed. We will meet in locations convenient to you.

Sample prompts might be: What drew you to start a school? What was it like for you to begin this journey? What stands out as one of the most memorable experiences in your school starting experience? What aspect of the experience had the greatest impact on you? Tell me about the highest and lowest moments of the experience for you. What aspects of your experience would you expect other school founders to encounter as they start schools?

What about confidentiality? We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, all audiotapes, transcriptions, and reflective journals will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's residence. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible, unless otherwise desired. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. All tapes and transcripts will be destroyed following the completion of this project.

___ I agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study (circle one or both).

___ I do not agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study (circle one or both).

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title BUILDING A SCHOOL OF DREAMS: UNCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STARTING A SCHOOL

What are the benefits of this research? This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about starting a school. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through an improved understanding of the process of starting a school.

Do I have to be in this research? Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

May I stop participating at any time? You may also refuse to answer any questions at any time during the interviews.

Statement of Age of Subject and Consent Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

[Please note: Parental consent always needed for minors.]

Signature and Date <i>[Please add name, signature, and date lines to the final page of your consent form]</i>	NAME OF SUBJECT	
	SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT	
	DATE	

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