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# Embracing the Bounty: Countering the Curriculum of Deficit

Diana Bishop

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EMBRACING THE BOUNTY:  
COUNTERING THE CURRICULUM OF DEFICIT

by

DIANA BISHOP

(Under the Direction of Sabrina Ross)

ABSTRACT

*Embracing the Bounty: Countering the Curriculum of Deficit* (2018) addresses the restrictive nature of neoliberalism and offers alternative perspectives and possibilities for change by countering the curriculum of deficit now prevalent in the United States – a curriculum reflective of neoliberalism’s invasion of public schools and the rationality that reduces students, teachers, and schools to statistics emphasizing economic value above all else. In this dissertation, the impact of neoliberalism on public schools and its destructive effects are discussed as are alternative philosophical frameworks. Through a series of essays, I explore how a curriculum of deficit infiltrated American public schools and demonstrate the ways in which rhizomatic theory and its inherent openness to diversity and creativity provide connections to the works of curriculum scholars and provide a foundation from which a curriculum of possibilities, rather than deficit, can be constructed.

INDEX WORDS: Curriculum, Deficit model, Standardization, Commodification, Neoliberalism, Creativity, Interdisciplinary, Deleuze and Guattari, Rhizomatic Theory, Diversity, Resistance, Greene, Eisner, Fromm

EMBRACING THE BOUNTY:  
COUNTERING THE CURRICULUM OF DEFICIT

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Worth, who has nourished my body, mind, and spirit throughout this journey.

To our daughters, Bryarly and Nora, who carry my hopes and dreams for the future.

And to my sister scholars and activists, let us continue to strengthen one another.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This nomad's journey did not end where I thought it would, and I am so grateful that it did not. I have changed in ways I had not expected and am the better for it.

From my first class with Dr. John Weaver, I knew that this quest would be different. This was not a quest for information; it was a quest for intellectual growth – a challenge to expand my limited understanding of the world. Although I did not see it at the time, I see now how our first assignment (to read twenty books, find a common thread, and write about how the works are connected) came to reflect the strength of rhizomatic theory and the connectivity between all things (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Thank you, Dr. Weaver, for luring me down philosophical paths that were both daunting and exciting.

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## PROLOGUE

*“We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant” (Dewey, 1934, p. 87).*

My 16<sup>th</sup> year as an educator was one of my most difficult. I witnessed the election of a racist, misogynistic, anti-intellectual as president and his appointment of an anti-public-school advocate as secretary of education. My school district gave a raise to our superintendent -- a person who has never been a teacher -- even while faculty were again refused pay increases. Likewise, a teacher assessment tool created by non-educators was used to evaluate me and my colleagues by someone who has never been an educator. To add insult to injury, teachers at my school (veteran teachers with advanced degrees) were told we would not be given high scores because it jeopardized the principal's career to have too many teachers identified as exceeding expectations. I felt defeated, angry, frustrated at being silenced at being discounted as an expert in a field in which I had significant experience and knowledge.

And while all of this was discouraging and insulting, none of it could compare with the heartbreaking deaths of five students last year from suicide and drug overdoses. These students were good students. They had loving families; they were engaged in extracurricular activities. They did everything society told them to do in order to be happy; but clearly, they were not. What was it I wondered that caused these children to kill themselves? Did they feel insignificant, invisible, and helpless? I spent a lot of time reflecting on what I knew about them as students, as people. They were ordinary, “normal” teenagers: a boy scout, a cheerleader, a baseball player, a

soccer player, and a member of the school marching band. What was it that was killing our children? I knew that the environment seemed increasingly toxic for teachers; we were silenced, marginalized, ignored, so I began to investigate the role our school culture played in creating an environment harmful to students. Ours is a very competitive school located in an affluent suburb of a major Southern city. I joke that our school belongs in Garrison Keillor's idyllic and imaginary town of Lake Wobegon "where all the children are above average." I couldn't help but wonder if our demands on our children were creating a toxic environment in which students had lost confidence and hope.

These ruminations led me to examine how we evaluate human beings. Who determines the standards? What is "average?" and why are we assessing human's qualities? Who serves to gain by these measurements and who stands to lose? These questions led me to explore ways how public education became hijacked by the military-industrial complex. The peregrinations of my research led me to dig deeply into how well-heeled corporate leaders have influenced public education from the early days of Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Vanderbilt and the General Education Board to today's powerful and wealthy elite including the DeVos, Mercer, and Gates families (Brown, 2015; MacLean, 2017; Mayer, 2016; McGoey, 2015). This led me to dig deeply into the Mount Pelerin Society (MPS), an international organization dedicated to the promotion of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Harvey 2005). The society, founded in response to increasing government involvement in business during the Great Depression, has infiltrated higher education and the U.S. government promoting an ideology that reduces all things (people, relationships, the environment) to economic value (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). It is an ideology that is reductive rather than additive. I saw how students and teacher were reduced to mere statistics and I wondered how this rationality profited those in power. I found answers in

the works of John Dewey (*Quest for Certainty*, 1929/1960), Raymond Callahan (*Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, 1962), Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1977), and Erich Fromm (*To Have or to Be*, 1976/2015). These works encouraged me to look for the ways in which neoliberalism profits those in power who see the masses as human resources to be managed and harvested.

At about the same time that I was researching neoliberalism and looking for alternative ways of thinking about schools, I also became involved with a local grassroots social activist group. We began in September 2016 as a small group of mothers living in a very politically conservative area. We have since grown to about 4,500 progressive women. Unlike traditional organizations that represent a tree-like hierarchy, our group was decidedly acentral. Our activities were planned and spontaneous, creative and opportunistic, yet also detachable and connectible. It struck me that our organization embodied rhizomatic theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It was our diversity, passion, creativity, and recruitment of other like-minded women that brought us strength and optimism. I began to see how rhizomatic theory could be applied to break through restrictive and reductive public school practices to create space where students would be allowed to create, connect, and grow into themselves.

I imagined myself as a rhizome and began searching for ways to break down the artificial barriers that serve as obstacles to student learning. Artificial constructs of time, place, and space in schools became opportunities to re-imagine them as barrier-free. I allowed my lines of flight to extend outside of the public school structure while also inviting community members inside. I looked for ways to allow curriculum to emerge organically and for ways to engage with our eco-communities. I am optimistic that I have provided a space for us to connect, create, expand, and

grow through the cracks in our educational system. No doubt there may be those who find my ideas unfeasible – economically inefficient – but what act of love is?

## INTRODUCTION

### **Context: The Root of the Problem**

It seems to me as an educator that the purpose of American public schools has become less about education and more about producing a standardized “product.” These “products,” however, are living, breathing human beings; yet, the educational system treats students as if they were not. By employing an industrial model to public education and cultivating a curriculum of deficit, the United States has bowed to corporate interests that value profit at the expense of the citizenry. This curriculum of deficit, cultivated by neoliberalism, reduces humans to mere resources to be sowed, cultivated, and harvested. Students who do not meet the standard are devalued and discarded. Students who exceed the standard are cut down to size. The valuation of humans as objects to conform to the goals of those in power has evolved into the official State philosophy, i.e. blaming the individual for his or her inability to meet expectations (Brown, 2015; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault 1971, 1977; Harvey, 2005). Educators, as agents of the State and bound by contractual obligations, have become accomplices in the oppression of our students. It need not, and must not, be so. We cannot perpetuate injustice against our students. Like the wild weed rupturing through a crack in the concrete, we must engage in resistance. As advocates of public education, we must be on the side of the child (Ayers, 2004b; Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Dewey, 1897; Freire, 1998; Freire, 2005; Gay, 2000; Giroux, 2004; Greene, 1998; hooks, 1994).

Observations of nature demonstrate that it is diversity, not conformity that yields the greatest growth and opportunity for life. This is a curriculum of possibilities. A curriculum of possibilities stands in contrast to a curriculum of deficit. Rather than seeking to “standardize” students, a curriculum of possibilities seeks to de-normalize schools by celebrating and

nourishing the fecundity and resilience that is only possible in an environment of diversity. Teaching is a natural, organic, and creative enterprise. It is an act of love and hope. However, a human-made cannibalistic institution of schooling in which the curriculum feeds off the child rather than nurturing the child has usurped the natural act of teaching. The patriarchal capitalist institution of schooling attempts to eradicate the organic concept of education that springs naturally from most humans regardless of age. Attempts to standardize curriculum spring from places of fear, not places of hope. They are attempts to control the unknown rather than embrace it.

In contrast, the importance of environmental diversity is well documented (Bowers, 2001; Carson, 1962/2002; Craige, 2002). History demonstrates the dangers inherent in homogeneity and the benefits of heterogeneity. For example, the cultivation of only one crop can increase vulnerability to starvation as was the case with the Irish potato famine. Similarly, the removal of one species can have disastrous effects on an ecosystem as evidenced by the removal of the gray wolf from Yellowstone National Park. However, by nurturing and embracing diversity, we make ourselves stronger (Bataille, 1967/1991).

#### **Autobiographical Roots of Inquiry**

My educational experiences – both good and bad – inform my construction of self. I am an Air Force “brat”, the middle daughter of a conservative Southern Baptist father and a liberal atheist Canadian mother; and therefore, born of ideological diversity. Although born in Colorado, I’ve lived in diverse geographical locales and educational settings: nine states, two countries, 28 homes; and attended nine public schools and four universities. I am a citizen of both the U.S. and Canada. I have worked in the private sector in international corporate marketing and in the public sector as a secondary school teacher. As such, my autobiographical



roots position me in “multiple cultures, multiple ways of knowing, and multiple ways of being” (Phillion, 2002, p. 5). I question any one truth. I am sensitive to diverse voices, experiences, and truths. I can envision multiple perspectives; I see the benefits of diverse ideas and experiences and have learned from them.

The benefit of diverse ways of knowing was first made evident when I was six years old. My father was transferred to the island of Oahu in 1964. Due to a lack of military housing and the high cost of living, we moved to the less expensive and less touristy windward side of the island. It had only been five years since Hawaii’s statehood, and White mainlanders were not welcome on this side of the Pali Mountain. My first day of school I was called a “dirty *haole*” and a “motherfucker” by the other children. I learned what it is like to be hated because of the color of my skin. I learned how it feels to be a despised minority. This was a fundamental life lesson. As a young child, I saw how cultures dominated and oppressed others for economic and political profit, and I also saw how oppressed cultures resisted marginalization. Even though the public Hawaiian schools I attended were built on land donated by wealthy White colonists, the curriculum was pro-Hawaiian. We learned how the White Americans used Christian missionary work as a pretense for cultural and land invasion later exploiting Hawaiian, Japanese, and Filipino plantation workers. We were taught how the White landowners colluded with the U.S. military to usurp power from the Hawaiian royal family and illegally annexed the Hawaiian nation. As the child of an American military father, this positioned me in the middle of a conflict of power. I saw at a very young age that the metanarrative of the U.S. was not always the truth, and I began to question the credibility of any who self-identified as an authority.

In sixth grade, I learned that teachers would pretend not to see the truth or were afraid of the truth. In art class, we were assigned to draw portraits of fellow classmates. Of course, my

best friend Rachel (pseudonym) and I wanted to draw each other. We positioned ourselves on opposing sides of the table and carefully sketched the nuances of the face of the friend we loved. I captured Rachel's rich brown eyes, her curly black hair, and the silkiness of her brown skin just perfectly – or so I thought –until the art teacher told me that I could not draw Rachel with brown skin, that it was disrespectful to do so, that we didn't "see" the color of her skin. I was angry and confused. Rachel *did* have brown skin and to ignore that was to ignore who she was and to ignore the truth. Was she implying Rachel's skin was "disrespectful"? By choosing to be "color-blind," my teacher was choosing to make Rachel and her experiences invisible (Applebaum, 2010). The lesson I learned was that I could not trust my teacher. Subsequent transfers throughout the 1960s and 70s subjected me to public schools where students were education reform guinea pigs. By the time I had arrived in high school, I'd attended nine public schools and had a jaded attitude towards schooling.

Being transient came with being an Air Force "brat," but it also created very strong bonds between my mother, sisters, and me. The four of us were the core of the family as Dad was frequently on flight duty and away for several weeks at a time. During one of his absences, he took his girlfriend to Mexico to serve as proxy for my mother in order to obtain a "quickie" divorce and marry his girlfriend. Dad informed my mother by mail a few days after my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Because Mexican divorces are not recognized by the State of California; my mother had to decide whether to press charges against him for bigamy (and risk losing the possibility of financial support) or file for divorce. She chose the latter although it did not seem to help us in the least. We were forced off base with nowhere to go. We'd only lived on the air base six months and my mother's family was in Newfoundland, Canada – over 3,400 miles away. Instead

of returning to her parents' home, we took a cross country bus using borrowed money to my father's family; they were the closest kin we had.

Our hopes of finding a soft landing in Virginia didn't play out. Never having worked outside the home, my mother had difficulty finding work. And even though she had graduated salutatorian of her class, the best job she could find was working the assembly line at a furniture factory where lay-offs and injuries were common. My father didn't pay child support and my mother could not afford a good attorney. It wasn't long before my father was totally out of our lives. I watched my mother battle sexism in the workplace and in the legal system my entire life. Because of this, she (whose father had denied her the opportunity to attend college on full scholarship because "women did not need an education") strongly encouraged my sisters and I to attend college and ensure our financial independence.

Inspired by my mother, yet penniless, my sisters and I worked our ways through college and graduate school. One of my jobs in college was at the *Richmond News Leader*, the major evening paper in the state capitol. I was a copy "boy" delivering Associated Press news hot off the wire to the reporters. I vividly recall a photo of a large ditch filled with the bodies of people slaughtered by Idi Amin, then President of Uganda. It reminded me of pictures of the Jewish holocaust. I was shocked at the carnage and rushed the photo and accompanying story to the international news desk. It never made it to the presses. I was told no one was interested in what happened to a bunch of people in Africa. The advertisers would not support those types of articles. I learned then the news is controlled by the advertisers, and the idea of a free and fair press is a myth in the United States. I was eighteen.

Upon graduating from college, I was able to use my degree in English to obtain work as a secretary in commercial real estate brokerage – a field dominated by men. I had to undergo

testing to prove I was as capable as the men and worthy of being promoted. I earned my real estate license and transitioned from secretary to commercial sales person. As the only female broker, I experienced sexual harassment and discrimination. I segued my market and data analysis skills developed in my commercial sales efforts into international marketing for a large hotel corporation. But when the board of directors wanted us to begin marketing to children (a new approach to “growing” the brand), I questioned the ethics of the business world and resigned. I refused to participate in manipulating the minds of children in order to turn a profit and left the corporate world...that is, until I became a teacher.

My entry into teaching was brought on by my initial resistance to the educational system as a mother. Frustration with the arbitrary restrictions on children led me to complete a post-baccalaureate teaching certification program in secondary education and later earn my M.Ed. Still frustrated by the idiocy of the American public school system, I entered the Ed.D. - Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern to help me understand the complicated framework of the public school system.

### **Focus of Inquiry**

In American culture, the majority of citizens are unaware of the invisible powers that direct their lives; they experience frustration and ennui but cannot pinpoint their sources (Foucault, 1977). They have been trained to believe that their experiences are normal, natural, and unchangeable. Many cannot imagine any alternatives. The neoliberal hegemony of greed negates our humanity and the environment by commodifying everything from which it can wring a profit (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2017; Harvey, 2005; McLaren, 2000, 2002, 2005). It encourages us to divest ourselves of our diversity, our hopes, and our dreams. Through a curriculum of deficit, we lose faith in our future and ourselves. But because neoliberalism is

human-made, I believe it can be unmade. Freire (2000) reminds us “both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness” (location 525). We can choose to remain in the dark, or we can light a candle. I believe by establishing a counter-ideology – a curriculum of possibilities reaffirming our humanity, our diversity, and our interconnectedness with each other and with our environment – we can move towards freedom, democracy, and hope.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To examine both the curriculum of deficit and its alternative, a curriculum of possibilities, will require the support of multiple and diverse theoretical frameworks. If a theoretical dissertation is a “work of deconstruction and invention” as Day (1993, p. 80) posits, then my argument in favor of diversity compels me to embrace and nurture a diversity of theories. Doing so provides me with multiple perspectives allowing for greater creativity and opportunities for growth. By employing multiple theories, I am embracing a diversity of knowledge reflective of a curriculum of possibilities.

Given the construction of a curriculum of deficit by those in power, critical theory provides the framework to explore the development and effects of a curriculum of deficit upon public education. Both critical theory and public education are interdisciplinary and include political, legal, cultural, and psychological concerns. The complexity of public schools lends itself to a heterogeneous approach. Critical theory provides a foundation for my understanding of the ways in which power hierarchies are constructed and the ways in which they are normalized and oppress others. Because this paper explores the ways in which students, teachers, and schools are perceived, evaluated, and oppressed; critical theory’s ability to be applied across disciplines proves most useful.

Critical theory has its roots in the Institute for Social Research, more commonly known as the Frankfurt School, founded by Felix Weil in 1923 (Simons, 2004). The term “Frankfurt School” refers not only to the institute itself but also to the school of thought associated with it. The Frankfurt School emerged against the rise of fascism and many of its members were exiled because of their leftist politics and Jewish heritage (Simons, 2004). Grounded in Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School generated works critiquing the ways in which dominant social groups, be they fascist, Nazi, or capitalist, maintain power through the subordination of others. Although critical theory is always political, it expands Marxism from political-economic concerns to cultural, psychological, and environmental concerns (Simons, 2004).

Today, critical theory includes “Marxism and post-Marxism, semiotics and discourse analysis, structuralism and post-structuralism, ideology critique of all varieties, deconstruction, feminism, queer theory, psycho-analysis, post-colonialism, [and] postmodernism” (Simons, 2004, p. 12). Critical theorists of education examine the ways in which in-school and out-of-school curriculum contributes to the maintenance of hierarchies benefitting those in power including the (mis)use of scientific positivism as value neutral. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which curriculum contributes to the commodification of public education and the oppression and marginalization of teachers and students. I see the ways in which neoliberalism has reduced public schools to places of economic exchange where students and teachers are appreciated only for their potential economic value. I have seen first-hand the destructive effects of neoliberalism on my students, my colleagues, and myself.

To develop my thoughts on this, I drew from the works of Erich Fromm, a member of the Frankfurt School. Fromm (1976/2015) was a psychoanalyst and social psychologist who explored the ways in which the promise of industrialization created an illusion of unlimited

production and consumption. In particular, I am interested in Fromm's (1976/2015) theories on the ways in which fear is employed to encourage consumption and how this emphasis on acquisitions connects to the field of education (1976/2015). In *To Have or To Be*, Fromm (1976/2015) explores the ways in which we've come to believe that having more equals being more. This relates to the ways in which measurements are applied to humans and how these numeric indicators are equated with our value as human capital and our competitiveness as economic products. In the world of education, higher standardized test scores, grade point averages, and evaluations on the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) contribute to neoliberalism's commodification of all things.

I am also influenced by Michel Foucault's work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) opened my eyes to the ways in which power is constructed, circulates, and is perpetuated through the use of discipline. The techniques employed to control the masses – observation, normalizing, and examination – are present not only in the prisons Foucault (1977) describes but also in public schools. The confinement of school desks, the Pavlovian response to bell schedules, and the surveillance and measurement of students, teachers, and schools all contribute to an environment of oppression. It is easy to see why Foucault believed the purpose of schools was to regulate and indoctrinate young people by isolating, normalizing, dividing, disciplining, and excluding those who did not fit the norm (Foucault & Lotringer, 1996). In public education, the students become the oppressed and the teacher is both the oppressor and the oppressed. Not only does this indoctrination contribute to the establishment and maintenance of those in power, but neoliberalism's intrusion into public schools has emphasized schools as places of economic rather than educational exchange (Foucault, 2010).

Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire (1985, 1998, 1997, 2000, 2005) provides further insights into hierarchies of power, methods of oppression, and opportunities for resistance. Those in power see everything as objects of their rights of domination. Only they are human; the rest of us are mere resources to be harvested. Their power and cultural influence alter our perceptions of reality. We come to see ourselves as being of less value and become unknowingly complicit in our own oppression (Freire, 2000). Our self-deprecation encourages us to trust those in power as if only they are the ones wise enough to know what is in our best interests. We succumb to their low opinions of us and strive to be like them – to judge ourselves on their standards. Teachers are held accountable for all social ills and are equated as mother-martyrs making us complicit in the oppression of our students (Freire, 1998). Freire (1985, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) reminds us, however, that where there is power there is also resistance, and he calls for teachers to challenge neoliberalism and engage in our and our students' liberation from oppression.

Michael Apple (1982), Patricia Hill-Collins (2009), Henry Giroux (1988, 2004, 2011, 2013), Joel Spring (1989, 2015) and Wendy Brown (2015) further inform my understanding of schools as places of capitalist influence. Apple (1995) sees schools as places of capitalist influence in which the school curriculum – both hidden and overt – serves to reinforce stratification of class, race, and gender and also privileges certain types of knowledge. The dominant hegemony teaches us to blame the individual rather than the power structures for one's failure, and we come to see social inequalities as normal (Collins, 2009). Giroux (1988, 2004, 2011, 2013), Brown (2015) and Harvey (2005) assert that the neoliberal pedagogy of oppression has infiltrated all aspects of our lives, marginalizing humans as disposable and limiting our access to democracy; and Spring (1989, 2015) emphasizes the ways in which schools have



become job-training sites for powerful corporate interests. Yet even while focusing on schools as places of oppression, critical theorists also recognize that where there is oppression there is also resistance. Giroux (2011) and McLaren (2002, 2005, 2015), like Freire (1985, 1998, 2000, 2005), call upon intellectuals to build coalitions capable of mobilizing real power and encourage educators to reject neoliberalism and fight against commodified education as an enemy of democracy. As Hardt and Negri (2017) note, “Power is never as secure and self-sufficient as it pretends to be” (location 264). The relationship between power and submission is one of constant negotiation and tension, and one which at this time in American history is sorely out of balance.

The curriculum of deficit – the idea that we are not enough – serves those in power by serving to keep us in our place – places of passive compliance in our own oppression and economic enslavement (Chomsky & Polycroniou, 2017). In contrast, a curriculum of possibilities emphasizes the importance of the individual, the connections among individuals, and the relationships among individuals and their environment. Western hierarchies of power are limited and necrotic. They do not allow space for growth and creativity – qualities necessary for imagination and knowledge. Instead, I turn to the concept of rhizomatic theory envisioned by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). Félix Guattari used his training as a psychotherapist to critique psychoanalysis and the institution itself. He was considered a radical activist and did not become famous as a critical theorist until he began collaborating with Gilles Deleuze (Goodchild, 2004). Deleuze, a historian of philosophy, was influenced by Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, and Henri Bergson. His publication of *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Deleuze, 1962/1986) introduced an alternative perspective on Nietzsche’s work and brought about the concept of post-structuralism (Goodchild, 2004). Together, Deleuze and Guattari proposed an “image of a

positive, affirmative life” that dismantled the Western world’s dependence on science, technology, and capitalism in its search for certainty in a natural world that is anything but certain (Goodchild, 2004, p. 170). Influenced by Bergson, Freud, Marx, and Spinoza; Deleuze and Guattari crafted a materialism which affirmed life as orientated towards differentiation and growth (Bergson), thought as driven by desire (Freud), humans and materials as contributors to the creation of thought and matter (Marx), and the idea that non-restrictive power enriches life and creates happiness (Goodchild, 2004). This materialism liberates us from the institutional restraints we had believed enchained us. Rather than imagining thought as a hierarchical tree of knowledge, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest the rhizome as a model in this new materialism for the limitless “planes of immanence.” Their materialism is one of possibility characterized by interconnectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, rupture, folding/unfolding/refolding, and experimentation. This is a philosophy of abundance, of imagination, and of growth. It serves in contrast to hierarchical power structures and represents opportunities for resistance to them.

Similarly, the works of science philosophers Niels Bohr (1961/2010), Paul Feyerabend (2010), M. Jayne Fleener (2002), Ervin Lázló (2003) and Karen Barad (2003) challenge the limits of rationality, the interconnectivity of matter, and the unpredictability of matter. They argue against the limits of positivism and the restriction inherent in language in describing that which is unknown and unpredictable. Oftimes are no words to describe that which scientists are discovering nor are there tools invested to measure that which they have witnessed (Bohr, 1961/2010; Feyerabend, 2001). To acknowledge this is to accept uncertainty and to embrace possibilities. Therefore, their theories – although rooted in quantum physics -- transcend into field of social science by offering alternative perspectives to the ways in which humans interact with one another and with the environment. If we are all of the same matter and interact with

other matter in ways that are only now being revealed, how can we limit ourselves to the possibilities we have yet to even fathom? These philosophies, therefore, offer places of resistance to a dominant philosophy which reduces all things to economic value, and instead offers a space to acknowledge the complexity, diversity, and importance of all matter.

In addition, the non-hierarchical planes of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and connections between matter provide space for the development of a curriculum of possibilities drawn from a democratic pedagogy of love. If we are all interconnected and interdependent, it is in our species best interests to tend to that which is in the best interests of others and our environment (Bowers, 2001). To do otherwise is short-sighted and destructive. As educators, we can look to John Dewey's (1897, 1902, 1916, 1929/1960, 1931, 1933, 1934) extensive body of work which establishes the importance of schools as places of creativity, diversity, and democracy. Alfred North Whitehead's (1929, 1933) essays on education also emphasized the importance of students making connections across disciplines and with life outside of school. More recently, Elliot Eisner (1994, 1998, 2002) and Maxine Greene (1988, 1991, 1995, 2001) call for schools as places where diversity, creativity, imagination, and freedom are nurtured. William Ayers (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006) reminds educators to be advocates for our students and to always see the humanity of each child, and bell hooks (2009) presents teachers with ways in which to critically contemplate their teaching. These ideas, combined with the ethics of care as progressed by Nel Noddings (2005, 2012) and Virginia Held (2006), create the framework for an alternative curriculum of possibilities valuing the diversity of humanity, the interconnectedness of us all, and the importance of imagination, creativity, and acentrality in education.

## Literature Review

A curriculum of possibilities serves as a counter-ideology to a curriculum of deficit. It affirms each living thing's importance to our world. It celebrates and encourages diversity in all facets of life. This is a curriculum informed by the voices of Hannah Arendt, William Ayers, Noam Chomsky, Patricia Hill Collins, John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Maxine Green, bell hooks, Michel Foucault, Erich Fromm, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Virginia Held, Jonathan Kozol, Peter McLaren, Nel Noddings, Fiona Robinson, Joel Spring, and Carter G. Woodson. It is a curriculum guided by professors Amelia Davis, Grigory Dmitriyev, Ming Fang He, Julie Maudlin, Marla Morris, Sabrina Ross, William Schubert, John Weaver, and Cordelia Zinskie – all of whom opened my mind to the rich and diverse field of curriculum studies.

These scholars, authors, and poets are entwined through themes of radical love of humanity and a call to revolutionary action. While John Dewey is the father of American education philosophy, Paulo Freire provides a vision of what a curriculum of possibilities could be. In his works, Freire consistently reminds teachers of the call to radical love; but this is not a passive love. This love is an “armed love” -- the fierce love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that we must all learn” (Freire, 2009, location 1429). To paraphrase Freire (2000), education should assert that each human is unique, connected, dependent, and attached to the world. We must re-teach what it is to be human.

I could not confirm Freire was influenced by the works of W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, John Dewey, or Michel Foucault; but I see in Freire's understanding of power, oppression, and resistance many of the observations made by these social philosophers. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), Carter G. Woodson (2012), Joel Spring (1989, 2013), Gloria Ladson-Billings

(1996, 2006), Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 2009), William Watkins (2001), and bell hooks (1994, 2003, 2009) illuminate the ways in which the White male dominant class discouraged and distorted not only the education of Black people, but also developed and perpetuated the deceit of Black inferiority as a means of protecting White privilege. This parallels the ways in which oppressors benefit by creating and perpetuating a dominant ideology based on fear (Fromm, 1976/2015; Foucault, 1977; Marcuse, 1991; Freire, 2000; Chomsky & Polychroniou, 2017). And long before the term “neoliberalism” was in use, Du Bois (1903) argued against the use of universities as simply places to “teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools or to be a centre of polite society” (location 922).

Similarly, Freire (2000) opposes the “banking” model of education as it “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (location 992). Both Freire (2000) and Dewey (1916) demonstrate the importance of each individual’s contribution, participation, and interaction in a democracy, with Dewey emphasizing “the more numerous and more variety points of contact” the better our society by securing a “liberation of powers” (1916, location 1406). In addition, Foucault’s (1977, 2010) analyses of systems of power and oppression are reflected in Freire’s (2000) exploration of the relationship between oppressors and the oppressed.

Influenced by these works, I am strengthened in my resolve that teachers “must be on the side of freedom, not against it” (Freire 2000, location 1116). We are called upon to put theory into practice as teacher activists. Freire’s lessons on teaching towards liberation are repeated in the works of bell hooks (1994, 2003), Ming Fang He and Joan Phillion (2008), and William Ayers (2004b, 2010). In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks reminds us of the power of the classroom – “the most radical space of possibility” – and validates the authority of our experiences (p. 12). Further empowering teachers as defenders of our students, Ayers calls on us

“to recognize and call out the humanity in each of our students. We become students of students. We take their side” (Ayers, 2004b, p. 66). Building on Freire’s foundation of radical love, Ayers (2004b, 2010) reminds us that although curriculum is built on a deficit model, teaching is an act of love in which the teacher recognizes the abilities, insights, and power inherent in the student’s humanity. Therefore, it becomes ethically necessary for teachers to engage in creative insubordination in order to be on the side of the child (Ayers, 2010).

This engagement becomes a form of personal~passionate~participatory inquiry the goal of which is to liberate those who are oppressed so that they are empowered to make their own decisions (He & Phillion, 2008). When students are empowered to make their own decisions, they embrace their individuality. By nurturing and embracing the unique qualities of each individual, we are creating an abundance of diversity – a curriculum of possibilities.

#### **Speculative Essays as Method of Inquiry**

I propose a philosophical inquiry exploring the construction and effects of the existing neoliberal curriculum of deficit with the formation and possibilities of a curriculum of possibilities. I conceive the use of “speculative essays” to persuade the reader of the necrotic effects of neoliberalism and encourage a shift towards a curriculum of possibilities. As noted by Schubert (1991), the speculative essay has been “a major form of curriculum inquiry throughout the history of curriculum studies” (p. 61). Schubert (1991) asserts the historic use of the speculative essay begins as early as the fifteenth century and includes the works of Martin Luther, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Dewey. In fact, most of Dewey’s writings are in the form of essays as are many of the works of Elliot Eisner, Maxine Greene, Madeline Grumet, Dwayne Huebner, Herbert M. Kliebard, Frederick Nietzsche, and Alfred North Whitehead. When Schubert (1991)

conducted a survey to identify the most influential curriculum articles, seven of the ten all used “persuasive philosophical pieces that use analytic, interpretive, and/or critical literary style rather than rigorous data-based or other highly rule-bound systematic forms of inquiry” (p. 63).

The speculative essay is limited only by the imaginative thought of its author. It can be, as Schubert suggests, “the best way to advance knowledge” (1991, p. 65). By pursuing the speculative essay as a means of philosophical inquiry, my dissertation reflects a curriculum of possibilities – one that is not tied to the rationalist, positivist tradition. It becomes a place of open dialogue and free expression: “If curriculum ...represents a striving to build a public space, then it would seem that there exists a compatibility of substantive concern and form of expression in the joining of curriculum and essay” (Schubert, 1991, p. 68).

According to Schubert (1991), the philosophical essayist builds upon existing knowledge but is also open to new insights that may be revealed through the process of essay writing. Because a curriculum of possibilities embraces the diverse, the eclectic nature of the speculative essay best reflects the diffuse foundations that have led me to this theory; and because this has been a “convoluted path” for me, essays provide a way for me to bring the reader with me on my journey. Given that my focus is a critique of neoliberalism as dominant hegemony, it seems natural to employ the speculative essay as a form of inquiry as it “transcends the problem of reducing human experience to an objectified commodity” (Schubert, 1991, p. 70). By using speculative essays as a form of philosophical inquiry, the form of inquiry also fits its function and parallels the philosophy of a curriculum of possibilities. As such, I trust that it will “both illuminate and contribute to a fullness of vision and imagination that enables one to lead a better life” (Schubert, 1991, p. 73).

The eclectic nature of the speculative essay reinforces my anti-positivist, anti-rationalist, and anti-neoliberalism stance. Feyerabend (2001, 2010) emphasizes that it is only by not following tradition that we make new discoveries; in fact, he says, “It is absolutely necessary for the growth of knowledge” (2010, p.7). Given the dominant hegemony of rationalism, a dissertation written in traditional form may serve the academy, but it does not serve the purpose of this inquiry; it merely serves to privilege prior habits of behavior and restrains imagination (Feyerabend, 2010). In contrast, the speculative essay allows me the freedom to explore and construct existing and new ideas.

The field of Curriculum Studies is eclectic in itself. It is broad-based and multi-disciplinary. It can be explored as historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, post-modern, auto/biographical, aesthetic, theological, and institutionalized text (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman; 2008). If curriculum is the course of life, it must be very broad indeed. It is by nature diverse, eclectic, and open to change. As I formulated my ideas of a curriculum of possibilities, I was not only influenced by the discussions of power and oppression found within critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought; but also those concerned with that which is marginalized at the expense of a neoliberal education. Therefore, I am guided by the works of John Dewey (1897, 1916), Mary Aswell Doll (2011), Maxine Greene (1988, 1991, 1995), and Chet Bowers (2001) who emphasize the importance of imagination, creativity, empathy, and community. Similarly, the neoliberal commodification of everything demands replacement by a feminist ethic of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2005, 2012; Robinson, 1991). Consequently, a concern with social justice implies not only concern with our fellow human beings, but also our stewardship of the planet and the creatures within it. This brings me to our interconnection with nature (Bowers, 2001; Jensen, 2004; Orr, 2004). Our interconnection



to each other and to our planet further connects to the philosophical writings of Karen Barad (2003), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), and Ervin László (2003). These philosophers do not privilege humans by centering us, but remind us that (in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson) we are “part and parcel” of nature, interconnected with each other and acting as agents upon each other.

### **Audience**

Educators are professional optimists. We invest our time, energy, and love in the future. We are curious and interested in the world around us and we seek to bring others to an appreciation of its delightful surprises. But our current system of neoliberalism does not allow for this. It pits human against human, humans against nature, and human against self. It is ultimately unsustainable in its destructiveness. In contrast, a curriculum of possibilities provides a counter-ideology in which our interconnectivity with each other and our world is emphasized and the need and appreciation for diversity is celebrated. If we begin as Freire (2000) suggests by naming our world, we can choose to name it as a place of abundance. Rather than identifying, sorting, and marginalizing students by their data, what if we identified and nurtured their gifts? What if we opened ourselves to the opportunities presented by not seeking knowledge *of* but learning *from*? I believe that by nurturing our students and cultivating their independence and unique gifts, we can reconstruct a society of diversity that benefits all. If we begin at the grassroots level and encourage our students’ growth, in time we can replace the artificially constructed mythology of deficit with a curriculum of diversity and abundance (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; 2003). By reaching out to each other and forming coalitions with sympathetic groups (Asimakopulos, 2011; McLaren, 2015), we can return equilibrium to the American system of checks and balances.

A curriculum of possibilities capitalizes on the strengths inherent in the field of curriculum studies. It is multidisciplinary. It is responsive. It is representative of the strengths found in the diversity of nature. It employs the scientific philosophy of biology and quantum physics, and its focus is on personal and societal growth. It provides balance to a positivistic, White male dominant hegemony; and therefore, liberates those who have previously been oppressed. It is a counter-ideology of hope.

### **Organization of Chapters**

The format of the dissertation does not lend itself to nomadic wanderings; a formal structure is demanded of the doctoral candidate. As a compromise, this dissertation is organized in essays in the tradition of Ayers (2004a), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Dewey (1897, 1902, 1916, 1933), Giroux (1988, 2001), Greene (1995, 2001), hooks (1994, 2009), Schubert (2009), and Whitehead (1929). This structure serves several purposes. It reinforces the organic diversity of the author's theory, and it allows the author to employ theoretical frameworks particular to each essay's topic while working within the constraints of the dissertation structure. In this way, the process of writing becomes methodology in addition to being a representation of ideas. It will consist of a prologue, five chapters, and an epilogue.

In the prologue, I discuss why I came to search for alternatives to the neoliberalist ideology that threatens our students, teachers, and democracy itself. I include my observations of the increasing corporatization of schools as places of human resources to be harvested and the detrimental effects on students and teachers, and I discuss how I employed rhizomatic thinking to seek opportunities for growth, creativity, community, and exploration.

Introduction (*The Root of the Problem*). In the first chapter, I examine the construction of the curriculum of deficit as it relates to neoliberalism, particularly our infatuation with the

defining, categorization, and ranking of abstractions resulting in a core belief in the defining of that which is “normal.” In this ideology, the construction of normal is defined by measurements created and valued by those in power in order to maximize their control over the masses. The belief in the superiority of White patriarchal heteronormativity dominates. All others are ranked in their relation to this standard. Those who do not qualify as normal are seen as substandard. By restricting and eliminating those who are outside the norm, creativity is fettered because “the innovations that are the essence of individuality are feared” (Dewey, 1934, p. 351). Philosophies that can be used to oppress individuality are touted as superior. Logic is defined not only in opposition to, but superior to, emotion because emotion, creativity, and imagination are threats to the status quo. As such, the arts become marginalized and the focus becomes standardization, mathematics, and the “science” of education – a continuation of censorship of creative thinking that harkens back to Plato and the Catholic Church (Dewey, 1934; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippens, 1999). The implications of this centrality are dependency and subordination. It becomes the official State philosophy; it takes root in the mind and conforms to the goals of those in power (Deleuze, 1987; Foucault, 1971, 1977; Franklin, 1974).

Chapter One (*The Seeds of Discontent*) explores the repercussions of neoliberalism on individuals and in public schools. Neoliberalism establishes and normalizes competition between people, cultures, and ideas. Through the lived curriculum, the concepts of superiority of gender, ethnicity, language, religion, intelligence, and talent are taught both in and out of schools. Based on the existing hierarchy, the majority of us are not male, White, English-speaking, Christian, or intellectual enough to compete nor will we ever be. This insecurity drives us to reaffirm our place in regards to others – to ensure that we and not others are on top. These messages of inferiority – of otherness – are communicated in the media and in our schools. The

“othered” (both students and teachers) enter schools demoralized becoming even more oppressed within the confines of our educational system. Not believing in ourselves, we succumb to artificial measurements of our worth. Based on our Western beliefs in objectivity, certainty, and competition; we have allowed the American school system to be held hostage to data and a homogenized curriculum comprised of disconnected branches of knowledge. The focus on memorization of secondary knowledge is not learning, but schooling. I argue that the modern emphasis on standardized learning assessed by standardized tests and controlled by teacher accountability is based on myths providing a false sense of security. Although we live in a world of complexity, schools are designed to promote homogeneity in response to a fear of individuality and unpredictability (Franklin, 1974). This creates disconnect between curriculum and reality for teachers and students. Public education, because its goal is to instruct and influence students, imposes the will of the dominant on the Other through modification (instruction), evasion and foreclosure (ignoring students’ alterity) and rejection (failure or suspension). This is an attempt to control the unknown through rationality. It “does violence because it seeks to shape, influence, and ‘lead’ the Other in a particular direction without consideration for persons as distinct subjects of differences” (Todd, 2003, p. 7). As a result, our educational system has become racist, sexist, classist, and necrotic.

Chapter Two (*Strangling the Tree’s Roots*) provides alternative ways of thinking about humankind and our relationship to our environment. To Westerners, the unknown and the unpredictable are frightening and must be controlled; Western philosophy with its rigidly defined constructs allows us to believe we are in control over the unpredictability of life. This human-made curriculum negates the power of nature; but as Georges Bataille notes, “We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce

its object to the condition of subordinated and managed things” (1967/1991, p. 74). In effect, the moment we become rooted in our knowledge of a thing is the moment in which we commit to callousness. Nothing is static, and our attempt to grasp that which is always changing, always responding to the world around it only condemns us to ignorance. This arrogance causes us to stop exploring, stop questioning that which we believe.

The natural world is one of abundance, unpredictability, diversity, and creativity. By restricting our thinking to a curriculum of deficit, we are limiting our ability to see the potential between and within these undefined spaces. Acentral, non-hierarchical models provide a more natural, democratic, and creative alternative to hierarchical rigidly defined concepts. Hidden within Western philosophy are thinkers who criticized dominant philosophies. These philosophers (Lucretius, Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson) shared a “critique of negativity, the cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the exteriority of forces and relations, [and] the denunciation of power” (Deleuze, 1977, p. 12). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) build upon these concepts and develop the concept of rhizomatic thinking or “nomad thought”. Nomad thought is not restricted to central hierarchical thinking. Nomad thought synthesizes multiple heterogeneous elements without inhibiting their future rearrangement. As such, nomad thought is affirmative, liberating, and creative. Most importantly, Deleuze & Guattari (1987) present nomad thought as a possibility for expanded thought characterized by “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, [and] offshoots” (p. 21). This is a curriculum of creativity, diversity, and hope.

These acentral non-linear philosophies deconstruct and blur the lines defined by State philosophy. Science philosophers (Feyerabend, 2001; Lazlo, 2003) invite us to explore the spaces between dominant concepts. These negative spaces are not empty, but full of possibilities

for creative thought. Feyerabend (2001) argues that we have been “conceptually blind” to the possibilities around us (p. 33). Nature itself demonstrates to us that our striated, hierarchical beliefs are a myth. Using recent developments in quantum physics, astrophysics, biology, and psychology, Lazlo (2003) creates a framework for a trans-disciplinary philosophy that is non-reductionist and non-materialist.

In Chapter Three (*Sprouting Out in Abundance*), I connect the key philosophical themes of a curriculum of possibilities with opportunities for opposition to neoliberalism’s grasp on public education. By resisting the rigid constraints of standardized schooling, teachers and students can find places of intellectual and creative freedom and break through these artificial constructs much as a seedling emerges in the cracks in a sidewalk. Nomad thought is opportunistic and I and teachers must be opportunistic, too. Although dominant Western thought values certainty, it is uncertainty and vulnerability that are essential to creativity and intuition (Keats, 2011). Otherwise, we are merely learning that which is already learned. It is between the known and the unknown that creative tension exists, and it is in the tensions of psychic disequilibrium that solutions are born. When we become unfettered from hierarchical value-laden descriptions of ourselves, we are free to explore that which is previously undiscovered. Deleuze & Guattari (1987) envision this rhizomatic nomadic thinking as a map that is “always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (p. 21). This becomes a curriculum of possibilities in which diversity, creativity, and connectivity are of utmost value and provide opportunities to break through and out of the striations created by Cartesian thought. A curriculum of possibilities invites creativity and imagination and becomes a place of freedom, curiosity, and harmony. It welcomes the opportunity to learn from and with others. It values humanity and uniqueness serving to develop

empathy among individuals. Based on acentral non-linear constructs, an interdisciplinary curriculum would incorporate visual art, literature, music, dance, science, mathematics, and the social sciences tapping into the imagination to bridge the spaces between these once segregate disciplines.

Purposeful, meaningful teaching involves not only challenging what seems normal in education, but also embracing the humanity and individuality of our students. By engaging each other – students and teachers -- in dialogue, music, art, dance, the environment, and texts (storytelling, myths, fairytales, autobiographies, and fiction), we merge the real with the symbolic – the id with the subconscious – the overt with the latent (Freire, 2000; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1994; Greene, 1991; Doll, 2011). Indeed, Doll (2011) states that being open to the “dimensionless places” (p. 75) offered by undefined space allows us to be receptive to the possibilities that surround us whether this be quantum physics or the vibrations of life as evidenced in dance. To be attuned to the planes of flight is to enter not only the ancient world of myth, but also the cosmos within and without. To be attuned to the openness of possibilities is to be receptive to one’s intuition. This “intuitive meta-awareness” includes a sense of direction that discerns connections between seemingly unrelated facts and forges them into unique forms (Kincheleoe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999, p. 55). It is in the space of the negative that Einstein formulated his assumptions of the universe and it is the place where arts make the invisible visible (Greene, 1991; Kincheleoe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999). The negative is the place of creation.

Chapter 4 (*Rhizomatic Theory and Social Activism*) journeys into my rhizomatic experiences as a teacher turned social activist. My sprouting out from a place of need following the 2016 election led me to connect with other like-minded people and resulted in my political

network growing from a handful of suburban women to a network of almost 4,500. My story reflects the ways in which lines of desire take flight and intersect with others also in search of a connection (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). These grassroots activities took me outside my home, my neighborhood, and into places I did not even know existed. It seemed as each time I connected with one activist, he or she would introduce me to another. These social-political peregrinations were often spontaneous, frequently creative, and particularly divergent. My connections to other activist groups often overlapped each other and led me to find opportunities within and between political and social plateaus. This experience was empowering and invigorating leading me to envision the rhizomatic opportunities available between students, teachers, and communities (Makiguchi & Bethel, 2002).

Chapter Five (*Thinking Organically About Schools – Spaces Between and Beyond*) envisions the adoption of a curriculum of possibilities in public schools. By eliminating the existing hierarchical structure of schools and their curriculum, could we plant the seeds of an educational system that is acentral, non-linear, creative, imaginative and diverse? What would these schools look like? In what type of environments would learning take place? I look at progressive schools from the past and present and refer to the works of the following scholars to answer these questions. In response, I envision schools as places of inspiration, participation, collaboration, creativity, beauty, community, democracy, and love (Ayers, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Dewey, 1897, 1902, 1916, 1931, 1933, 1934; Eisner, 1998, 2002; Freire, 1985, 1994, 1998, 2000; Gay, 2000; Greene, 1995, 2001; He, 2010; Held, 2006; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2009; Howard, 1999; Illich, 1970/2013; Nieto, 2008; Noddings, 2005, 2012; Palmer, 1998; Sadhguru, 2016; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, J. 2010; Schubert, 2009; and Whitehead 1929, 1933).



In the epilogue, I discuss the ways in which my research has opened “lines of flight” to me both theoretical and practical and how these vast and diverse paths are but a reflection of a scholar’s curriculum of possibilities. I acknowledge that in many ways my vision of schools as places of abundant possibilities may seem but an optimist’s musings, a utopian dream; but what is teaching but an act of hope?

## Chapter One

### Seeds of Discontent: The Corruption of Public Education

I teach at one of the top public high schools in the United States. Located in an affluent suburban area of a large Southern metropolitan area, the emphasis at our school is on competition – competition between students and competition between schools. The dominant message is that our students and our school must be the best at *everything* -- academics, athletics, and music. This message permeates throughout the school and the community. Children in our community are not expected to be average; they must be *above* average – more intelligent, more attractive, and more athletic than students in other communities. This tenet is communicated at a young age when students are sorted into small group, team-taught, or gifted classes; and it is reinforced throughout our community. By the time children reach high school, they know that excellence is the expectation and anything less is failure.

Prior to the start of the school year, parents and their children are invited by my high school to attend seminars outlining for them what will be necessary for their child to be considered successful. One of these, “The Realities of Rigor,” emphasizes the competitive college application process and the importance of ensuring that their child has “options.” They are encouraged to enroll in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses in order to make them more competitive and give them advantages over their peers. In the spring during registration for the upcoming school year, morning announcements by the principal encourage students to register for advanced placement (AP) and honors courses and remind them to remain competitive. The message, of course, is that students in non-honors courses are not capable of competing – that they don’t have what it takes. During registration, guidance counselors direct

students to honors and AP courses and whisper to the students and their parents that they “wouldn’t like being in the same classroom with *those* kids.”

Competition with one’s peers and public shaming of those who do not excel is reiterated during the academic pep festivals held twice each year in the fall and in the spring. During these festivals, only those students who earn a 3.0 GPA or higher, or who have increased their GPA by half a point are allowed to attend. These festivals feature live entertainment, inflatable slides, games, free food, free t-shirts, and a couple of hours respite from time in the class room. The t-shirts boldly identify its wearer as the recipient of an honor card – a card that provides them entry to these events and discounts on products and services of neighborhood businesses. The importance of the honor card t-shirt is reinforced by the encouragement of students to wear the t-shirt on Thursdays. Students who wear their t-shirts on Thursdays are rewarded either with candy or by having their name entered into a lottery for free chicken biscuits. This is a perk unavailable to those students who are average or below. Those students who do not excel – who do not have “honor” -- remain in the classroom with the other less unfortunate students while their classmates frolic on the football field, bounce on the inflatable moonwalks, and eat free food donated by the PTA. Approximately 30% of the students will not qualify for this academic festival, but no one seems to care that they are essentially punished for not performing well on academic assessments. Because data in the form of grades proved these students did not rise to the challenge; they are identified as losers, lazy, druggies, or thugs. The mentality is that they don’t deserve to participate in these events because they didn’t earn the privilege. Many will skip school on the day of these academic celebrations rather than be shamed and literally left behind. At my school, this 30% represents approximately 600 children who are publicly shamed and

shunned because they did not excel academically. Cruel, isn't it? Yet in the drive for evidence of excellence, schools have devolved into places where numbers, not students, matter.

This emphasis on competition and its identification of children as winners or losers is the result of neoliberalism's invasion of American culture and it is reflected in our public schools. Neoliberalism is a belief that everything including the value of a human being can be reduced to economic value. Children, teachers, and schools are given numeric scores used to determine their quality. Everything and everyone must become accountable; data must be employed to prove the students', teachers', and schools' value. As a result, schools have veered away from classical concepts of education for education's sake and towards corporate America's desire for schools to produce compliant, non-thinking workers (i.e. products) capable of remaining seated and completing boring tasks. To be a successful student in public schools, one must follow the rules and regurgitate information. To be identified as a student of honor, evidence of one's mathematical score of achievement must be above average. Those students who do not meet the exacting requirements are discarded much as one would reject a defective product.

I have seen the impact of this devaluing of human worth in the school where I teach. In the past 12 months, I have attended the funerals of three students who committed suicide and two who overdosed on heroin. As I see it, this numeric assessment of a student's worth benefits no one but those in charge of expediting the sorting process in support of economic efficiencies. It hurts the child and the teacher because it reduces education to an economic investment. The only ones who profit are those who are only concerned with profits, and they do not care at what price these profits are won.

I realize that as an educator my view of education may be considered idealistic. I believe in the intrinsic value of knowledge, i.e. education for its own sake. I believe that individuals

benefit from understanding and appreciating the world in which they live and that this knowledge has value regardless of whether it results in an economic return on investment. Although certainly economic value can be attached to education – apprenticeships, medical residencies, etc. – the corporate influence in education today is not focused on what is good for the child but rather on what is good for the bottom line. My question is then, “How did public schools devolve into places of production where the needs of the corporation outweigh those of the individual or those of society?” To answer this question requires a look at the history of corporate influence and neoliberalism in American education.

#### **The Germination of Neoliberalism in Public Schools**

Until the mid-1800s, a student’s education was the sole responsibility of the parents, not the state. As such, only the wealthy could afford private tutors to instruct their children in the classics -- Greek, Latin, and the Western canon (Kliebard, 2004; Pinar et. al., 2008). However, as the U.S. population grew so did the interest in developing schools to educate the common people. Initially, these schools attempted to replicate the classical curriculum of private schools; or as the *1828 Yale Report on the Defense of the Classics* affirms, the purpose of education was to “expand the power of the mind and to store it with knowledge” (qtd. in Pinar, 2008, p. 74).

However, as cities grew at rapid rates due to industrialization and immigration, the combination of foreigners, emancipated African Americans, and the end of child labor contributed to a sense of social chaos; and as a result, the control of public education shifted towards controlling the production of a standardized American (Callahan, 1962; Franklin, 1974). Influenced by a changing population, the industrial revolution, and pressure from industrialists; schools embraced an industrial model focused on efficiency, standards, and the bottom line. Two national economic crises -- the panic and subsequent depressions of 1873 and 1893 -- magnified

feelings of public instability and increased scrutiny of public institutions including schools (Callahan, 1962). Education, according to sociologist and eugenicist Edward A. Ross, was seen as the most effective weapon of social control and the best means of instilling obedience (1896). As such, schools became places to assimilate children into the American way of life (Callahan, 1962; Franklin, 1974; Kliebard, 2004). The rise of industrialization and the harnessing of the masses into a source of cheap labor provided an example of how to control the creative and individual process of the artisan into a mass-produced standardized product thus taking power away from the individual and putting it in the hands of wealthy industrialists. Influenced by the dominance of businessmen, the efficiency of industrial factories, the doctrine of social efficiency, and a distrust of public institutions as “inefficient and wasteful” (Callahan, 1962, p. 15); public schools turned to industrial methods of exact measurement and precise standards in order to cut costs while at the same time creating a “predictable and orderly world” through transforming schools to factories of learning (Franklin, 1974; Kliebard, 2004, p. 76).

The wealthy industrialists of this “gilded age” not only benefited from the abundance of cheap plentiful labor, but they also saw the benefit of harnessing this “raw material” and converting it into a “product” that would meet their standards. Not surprisingly, industrialists – Andrew Carnegie, Charles A. Pillsbury, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt -- were among the first to create foundations and organizations that served to influence public education laying the groundwork for the Bill and Melinda Gates, DeVos, and Walton family foundations that currently influence public education policies (Mayer, 2016).

These philanthropic foundations created by the early robber barons served two purposes: they offset the negative publicity resulting from their cutthroat management techniques, and they widened the industrialists’ realm of power and influence (McGooney, 2015). Large-scale

charitable works also provided a win-win scenario for the wealthy -- the financial gift provided good public relations and came with an obligation of the beneficiary to the donor (McGoey, 2015). These philanthropic foundations envisioned by in the early 1900s by reverend-turned-advisor Frederick T. Gates were embraced by George Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller who became influential in framing the American curriculum not only by encouraging capitalism and competition, but also by shaping the direction and standardization of public education (McGoey, 2015).

These philanthropic foundations wielded great power because the original donor had control not only of the money he donated, but also the money raised by the foundation; thus expanding his power and influence. He also had the privilege of selecting the board of trustees who, in their indebtedness to their sponsor, tended to direct funds to interests beneficial to the sponsor (Umpenhour, 2003). Gates also convinced Rockefeller along with other elites including the Carnegies and the Vanderbilts to create the General Education Board (GEB) in 1902. At the time, there was no federal oversight of public education. There were no standards, no regulations, and no control. Touted as being philanthropic, the purpose of the GEB was to promote state-management of schools rather than local management thereby removing the opportunity for schools to influence the curriculum and culture reflective of local interests. By wresting control of local school management, it became easier to push a curriculum of interest to the elites. Its purpose, in the words of Frederick Gates (1913) was to mold the public into docile citizens and workers:

In our dream we have limitless resources, and the people wield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand. The present educational conventions fade from our minds; and, unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive

rural folk. We shall not try to make any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or of science. We are not to raise up among them authors, orators, poets, or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians. Nor will we cherish even the humbler ambition to raise up from among them lawyers, doctors, preachers, statesmen of whom we now have ample supply. (pg. 6).

The organization's name, national presence, and lack of obvious connection to these wealthy capitalists contributed to the public's perception that the GEB was an official government agency thus providing it with additional authority. This deliberately constructed misconception, along with the funding provided by the GEB, gave it considerable influence in promoting and controlling the creation of higher education, public education in the South, private schools for African-Americans, teacher education, and agricultural education (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992; Shafer & Snow, 1962; Watkins, 2001).

From its inception to the GEB's demise in 1960, John D. Rockefeller or his son controlled the money, programs, conferences, and policy papers produced by the GEB and *all of* these programs emphasized education as places of job training. Carnegie and Rockefeller had much to gain by creating and supporting education policies of benefit to them. As might be predicted, the areas of education controlled by the GEB supported the paternalistic and racist attitudes of the elite and contributed to the industrial model of schooling (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992; Watkins, 2001). At the secondary level, the GEB's influence would determine what professors were hired and how those positions were funded, what policy papers would be presented and supported, and what curriculum would be deemed of most value. Surveys of education and policy statements were funded, published, and shared that supported the philosophies of the GEB, and mental measurements were created that reinforced the desired



placement of students (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992). The GEB and the directed philanthropy of the Rockefeller family testifies to the ways in which private interests shaped education and public policy: “Rockefeller activity showed that ‘scientific’ philanthropy was, in effect, ad hoc law making” (Watkins, 2001, p. 134). In sum, the GEB saw education as preparation for future employment.

### **Industrial Methods – Public Schools**

As might be predicted, the areas of education controlled by the GEB supported paternalistic and racist attitudes of the elite – an industrial model of schooling still evident in today’s public schools (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992; Watkins, 2001). Frederick Winslow Taylor’s industrial efficiency methods and John Franklin Bobbitt’s emphasis on scientific measurements of students’ career potential continue their “veritable orgy of efficiency” in today’s American public schools’ (Kliebard, 2004, p. 80). Taylor and Bobbitt’s emphasis on education as a means of increasing “the efficiency of industrial society” through the proper selection, channeling, and harvesting of national human resources remains evident in today’s emphasis on test scores (Spring, 1989, p. 2). We see corporate-industrial America’s influence in the language, procedures, hierarchies, and quality control standards employed throughout public schools.

Taylor’s goal was not only efficiency and lower costs, but also a desire for order and control. From its beginnings, application of the Taylor method was framed both in economic and patriotic terms. Taylor believed that by establishing quality and production standards, efforts could be brought to bear to bring workers up to par thus benefiting business and the nation. He believed that men were inherently lazy and that the accountability measures of the scientific method would bring pressure to bear upon their performance; hence the concept of “management by measurement” (Callahan, 1962; Nadworthy, 1955). According to Kliebard (2004),

conservatives rallied around the idea of scientific efficiency and encouraged its adoption in schools. Although the Taylor method was initially employed as a means of increasing profits, it became synonymous in public schools as good government. Theodore Roosevelt himself praised the Taylor method: “We couldn’t ask more from a patriotic motive, than scientific management gives from a selfish one” (Callahan, 1962, p. 27).

Public pressure on schools to be accountable to taxpayers extended to all American educational institutions from grammar school to universities (Callahan, 1962). John Franklin Bobbitt’s article on curriculum published in 1912 (“The Elimination of Waste in Education”) suggested schools make use of the raw material (students) by only teaching them what the student was capable of learning and using – practical applications -- so as to avoid “grind[ing] out useless product” (Patten, 1911). According to Callahan (1962), Simon Patten’s criticism of public education was praised by those who wanted to use schools as job-training sites but also those who wanted to cut costs at any price.

For both Taylor and Bobbitt, the emphasis was on education as a means of increasing “the efficiency of industrial society” through the proper selection, channeling, and harvesting of national human resources (Spring, 1989, p. 2). Therefore, it is not surprising that the corporately owned GEB provided the initial funding for Robert Yerkes and Lewis Terman (proponents of eugenics) to develop intelligence tests for children so that students could be sorted efficiently and economically (Franklin, 1974). Funding the development of a sorting mechanism would be of future economic value to the corporate investors saving them time and money as schools provided the necessary indoctrination and skills. And even though Yerkes and Terman’s work has subsequently been discredited as racist, these tests provided the foundation for standardized IQ, ability and placement tests still used today, and they continue to influence the type of

education a student will receive (Gould, 1981; Spring, 1989). These are standards, of course, defined by those in power (White male elites) making it difficult (if not impossible) for students who are not of the same race, gender, culture, or economic class to excel on these tests.

Subsequently, those students who perform poorly tend to be channeled into an educational track emphasizing obedience and routine; they become order-takers (Spring, 2013). Conversely, those students who meet or exceed the standards are identified as “one of us” and receive an education emphasizing critical thinking and independent work; they become management – order givers (Spring, 2013). Those students who are situated outside the “norm” (i.e. students of color, students with disabilities, LBGTQ youth, and non-compliant students) are often cast out of the educational system as defective products (Flannery, 2015), with Black students expelled at a rate three times that of Whites, and Black and Latino students accounting for 70% of police referrals at schools (US. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2004).

These tests are an assault on a child’s sense of self-worth. Standardized testing provides order and control through the conflation of test scores with market value. Students with high IQs and high GPAs are seen as more worthy than others; and educators who teach advanced placement and honors classes benefit from this halo effect. In contrast, services to students with special needs have been significantly reduced. Funding of the arts has been cut. In effect, testing has become an obsession serving two oppressive and undemocratic purposes: the sorting of the product (i.e. the student) and the control of the means of production (i.e. the teacher).

Individuals surrender their own personal dreams, engage in remorseless competition, and abandon the social contract. Is it any wonder that mental illness, self-harming behaviors, and drug abuse is on the rise in the pressure cookers we call schools (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han; 2016)?

By effectively reducing human beings to objects with a market value, neoliberalism has resulted in the commodification of public education. Students are expected to self-invest wisely in order to benefit the economy (i.e. the capitalist elite), and education is evaluated for its “contribution to capital enhancement” (Brown, 2015, p. 177). As Wendy Brown states, neoliberalism becomes “the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity” (p. 44). The process of testing and sorting removes individual agency. How can a person make decisions “fully on their own” when they have been limited by the definitions of another (Greene, 1988, p. 101)? And how can we be independent agents free to make our own decisions as long as our curriculum is controlled by those who wish to oppress us (Collins, 2009; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2000, 2002, 2015)?

With schools teaching a curriculum of deficit, is it any surprise that many students either engage in a self-protective disassociation with public education or internalize their despair through acts of self-harm? What does a child learn when test scores are used as evidence of his or her deficits? They either learn they not good enough or they learn that the system is rigged. Either way, he is taught hopelessness and this is NOT a lesson learned at home; it is a lesson learned at school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), graduation rates for Latinos/Hispanics (69%) and Blacks (73%) are considerably lower than that of Whites (86%). Is it any wonder when the tests are made using the language of the White upper middle class college graduate and favor those who are privileged to have been born and raised in this culture? But schools don't tell students this; instead, we teach students that there are standards they must meet and if they fail to do so they are, by definition, “substandard.”

A system that attempts to measure the ability and value of a student is doomed to mis-measure that child's potential; and the emotional, mental, and economic repercussions of this

mis-measurement are enormous (Lévy, 1997). The damage done is not only to the soul of these students, but it becomes a curriculum of perpetual deficit. The economic impact of leaving school is significant particularly for minorities and women, but so too is neoliberalism's culture of deficit in which the poor are seen as unworthy burdens on society. Fed on a curriculum of deficit, students come to believe they are worthless. This self-loathing has manifested itself in increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, and drug overdoses among America's youth (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han; 2016). The increased pressure to excel and the subsequent shame associated with failure stimulate self-loathing and self-harming behaviors (Brody, 2008). Between 2005 and 2014, major depressive episodes in teenagers increased by 37% (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han; 2016). Not surprisingly, drug abuse has increased perhaps as a means of self-medicating. The school where I work is located within a geographic area called "The Heroin Triangle" in the northern, affluent suburbs of a large Southern metropolis. According to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), heroin-related deaths in the heroin triangle have risen by 3844% between 2011 and 2017 as drug users have switched from prescription painkillers to heroin -- less expensive, but deadlier (Wolfe, 2017). Most of those killed are teenagers and young adults.

In summary, the push to excel (by a particular deficiation) has caused schools to be more than factories of learning; they have become toxic environments in which many young people are taught that they are worthless and without value. Sorted and measured from birth, we have trained our youth to accept the standards defined by those in power as assessments of their own self worth. For most of us, this means we are not White, male, heterosexual, Christian, or rich enough to be considered of value. At the public school level, students are taught they literally do not "measure up." We communicate this through the constant testing, measuring, and

competition of students. Those students who do not meet the standard set by those in power are dismissed as unworthy like the students who are publicly shamed at my school by being forced to stay in class while their peers celebrate their high GPAs.

This is the curriculum of deficit. By brainwashing the majority of Americans to believe they are inferior, the power elite maintains supremacy. Having achieved dominance, the elite now own the corporations, lawmakers, the media, and are on route to takeover public education. Through these powerful networks, the ruling plutocracy of the United States ensures the oppression of others. Paulo Freire (2000) reminds us that all education is political and the American culture of neoliberalism hybridizes economic and political power at the expense of our children. It indoctrinates and assigns a value to its citizens, and these identifiers limit access to happiness, freedom, and democracy. When we forcefully identify and assign a value to a child, and then sort that child into a curriculum based upon standards that are created by someone other than the individual; we are restricting that child's ability to choose their own path to happiness.

## Chapter Two

### Strangling the Tree's Roots: Alternative Philosophies

Over the years, I have taught thousands of students. With each passing year, I have watched as my students and I have lost our individuality and diversity to the demands of the neoliberal culture that has come to dominate public schools. I have seen my students reduced to commodities represented in numbers and binaries – GPA, SAT, ITBS, EOC scores, age, male/female, White/African American/Hispanic – and my skills as an educator confined to a digit on a scale from one to four. These identifiers become static representations of who we are – reductions of our realities – used to make it easier for others to avoid the complexities of our humanity. In this chapter, I examine how these limitations of thought evolved from places of insecurity and provide an alternative philosophical framework of creativity for a curriculum of possibilities.

#### **Fear and the Quest for Certainty**

To humans, knowledge is a tool. We find security in the certainty of knowledge. Given humans' ability (or curse) to live not only in the present but also to anticipate the future, it is not surprising that humans have embraced the quest for certainty by allying themselves with powerful god(s) and/or by “construct[ing] a fortress[es]” out of that which might threaten them (Dewey, 1929/1960, p. 3). These fortresses include not only physical barriers but also metaphorical fortresses of knowledge. We believe that if we can know the world, we can control it. By possessing concrete, measurable knowledge, we believe we can wrest control of our lives and be free of fear; but in our obsession with uncovering that which is “antecedently real,” we have failed to learn how to adapt to uncertainty (Dewey, 1929/1960, p. 17). George Batailles (1967/1991) notes that it is this fear and our search for certainty that cause us to turn to the very

solutions that are at odds with our freedom. It is my belief that fear and anxiety are the sources and supports of a curriculum of deficit – a curriculum that seeks to restrain and define through normalization. Rather than freeing ourselves from uncertainty, a curriculum of deficit envelops us in fear and anxiety – fear that we are not enough; fear that others will take what little we believe we have. This fear restricts our growth; we are afraid to push beyond the confines of our perceived safety.

In contrast, confidence and curiosity engender a curriculum of possibilities – a curriculum in which we embrace and learn from diversity, break free from artificial standards, and in doing so, provide places where creativity, compassion, and joy can grow. In a curriculum of possibilities, human diversity is recognized as essential to the survival of our species and an individual's qualities and interests are nurtured and nourished rather than pruned and harvested for sale. A curriculum of possibilities focuses on who a person *is* rather than what a person *has* – being versus having (Fromm, 1976/2015).

### **The Roots of a Curriculum of Deficit**

From the beginning of time, humans have attempted to understand the world around us. For many, religion has provided a method of certainty in which “all things happen for a reason.” This can be a much more comforting idea than acknowledging that we don't know why or how things happen. Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) because they are monotheistic are also appealing and reassuring to those who seek certainty. Believers are taught there is only one God; one way. There are no choices to be made; no hedging of bets. Secondly, Judeo-Christian religion provides a structure to the universe that is human-centered. The Old Testament states that man is made in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and given dominion over all living things (Daniel 2:38). What human wouldn't find that appealing? Western religions with



their strictly defined constructs allow us to believe God is in control over the unpredictability of life. Hence, the Torah and the Christian Bible become rulebooks helping one to navigate through this uncertain world. The deal is that if one follows the rules, one will be rewarded – if not in this life then in the next.

In America, the Protestant tradition perpetuated the idea of an authoritarian God requiring humans to subjugate themselves in favor of a force outside themselves (Fromm, 1994).

Additionally, the Puritan belief in predestination resulted in increased anxiety regarding one's place in this life and the next, but it also affirmed the basic inequality of humans (some are born doomed and others for salvation) allowing some to self-righteously assert their "natural" superiority over others (Foucault, 2010; Fromm, 1994). This becomes an authoritarian and patriarchal framework; and although its order gives humans a sense of certainty, it restricts us within a dominant ideology that “veils reality” and limits how we perceive the world (Freire, 2005, location 678). In effect, it becomes a curriculum of deficit because we are limited to only one way of perceiving the world. This man-made hierarchical curriculum centers humanity but ignores what could be learned from the natural world with all its unpredictability, diversity, and creativity – what I choose to call a curriculum of possibilities.

Our desire for certainty causes us to attempt to define the world around us. The word itself -- “define” comes from the Latin *definire* means “to bound, to limit.” When we define; we control, we establish certainty. The easiest way to define a thing is to identify what it is and isn't. Definitions, therefore, can fall victim to binaries, encourage the use of comparison for definition, and assign a value based on this comparison (Foucault, 1971). But to compare opens Pandora's box of measurements and overconfidence in the certainty – the logic -- of numbers.

Numbers become our truth and our security, and we turn to them to prove to us what is real in the moment and to predict what will be real in the future (Dewey, 1929/1960). The belief that only that which is rational is also that which can be scientifically-proved using mathematics has its roots in Aristotle's "First Philosophy," but the scientific revolution of the 1700s, the industrial revolution of the 1800s, and the efficiency epidemic in the 1900s added validity and importance to mathematical measurements (Dewey 1929/1960; Callahan, 1962; Kleibard, 2004). The elevation of science and mathematics as definitive forms of proof has deformed into dependence not only in the certainty of what can be measured, but a frenzied enthusiasm for measuring *everything* as if that alone would provide us with security.

It seems that due to our inculcated insecurity, we can't be sure we're making progress unless it can be explicitly measured. Neoliberalism builds upon this emphasis on positivism yet twists it into a rationality in which everything and everyone is measured in terms of economic value (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Both are mechanisms of negating that which cannot be measured, but neoliberalism is the most destructive of the two as it moves positivism into the realm of economics and evaluates all things based on quantifiable return on investment (ROI) (Brown, 2015; Ebenstein, 2015; Spring, 2015). Investments, by definition, are acquisitions – they supplement that which an entity already has. Investments presuppose that one would benefit from spending time or money to obtain the desired object or quality in hopes that it will add value to the person either financially or socially. This desire to add value combined with the rise of capitalism presupposes that the person was not enough – that there were deficiencies the investment could eradicate – thus placing the burden of success or failure upon the individual (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2010; Fromm, 1994). Neoliberalism then becomes a mode of thinking

in which no one is good enough – everyone has room for improvement. This is a curriculum of deficit.

This curriculum of deficit is a curriculum profiting those who benefit from us believing that we are not enough – those who wish us to live in a constant state of anxiety that keeps us vulnerable to outside control and contributes to consumerism as a way of being “more” (Foucault, 1971; Fromm, 1976/2015). In American culture, “if one *has* nothing, one *is* nothing” and we toss around phrases like “bigger is better” and “he who dies with the most toys wins” (Fromm, 1976/2015). We measure others and ourselves by our acquisitions, by what we have, and live in fear that others will see that we are not enough (Fromm, 1976/2015). Acquisitions become a way of demonstrating we are more than we were before. These acquisitions become add-ons much as one would increase the size and value of one’s house by adding on a room or a pool. We come to believe that if we can be more, we will be safe and happy; but this is a fool’s paradise. Consuming becomes a never-ending means of relieving anxiety; we can never have enough to salve the uncertainty within us. Doubtful that we are “enough,” we turn to others to for assurance, to measure our worth; yet forgetting that in doing so, we empower others, not ourselves. We become created in their image rather than our own.

### **Curriculum of Deficit in U.S. Public Schools**

The fear that we are not enough is characteristic of a curriculum deficit. It is a result of neoliberalism’s influence in public schools, and the anxiety that follows in its wake. Neoliberalism brings with it market metrics that define the student’s, the teacher’s, and the school’s worth. Yet market metrics only serve the purposes of those in power -- disciplinary tools providing definitive measurements of attributes those in power decide are important enough to be ordered and measured so that results can be reduced to mathematical averages used to

decide what is normal or not (Covaleskie, 1993). These norms become the standard and serve to assess the student's, teacher's, and school's economic usefulness (Foucault, 1971). As such, neoliberalism reduces education, extracurricular activities, and social relationships to economic exchanges (Foucault & Lotringer, 1996).

Neoliberalism's ascendancy in public schools can be traced back to rising influence of the Mt. Pelerin Society, its funding by wealthy industrialists, and its propagation of free market economies particularly through the Chicago School of Economics (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Spring, 2015). Beginning in the 1940s, the Chicago School of Economics promoted the idea that knowledge and skills learned in schools were capital investments to be used in economic activity. The ideas promoted by Chicago economists -- Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, Theodore Schultz, and Gary Becker -- are familiar to us today. Hayek, one of the founders of the Mt. Pelerin Society, promoted the idea of a market-oriented economic system. Friedman proposed school vouchers be used to encourage competition, and he also promoted the idea of student loans as investments in future earnings (MacLean, 2017). Schultz argued that education increased growth in the economy and advocated for schools teaching skills that supported economic growth: science, mathematics, technology, and engineering. He also encouraged exploitation of natural resources asserting that he was confident of humanity's ability to turn to science to solve resultant problems. Gary Becker asserted that personal and public investment in education would result in national economic growth and greater return on investment (Spring, 2015). Becker (1981) even declared it was more economically beneficially to be selfish than altruistic. His ideas put increasing pressure on schools to teach skills seen as having greater impact on economic production than on studies that might lead to social justice, civics, and the arts (Spring, 2015). Together, these corporately-

funded economists laid the foundation for neoliberalism's influence in schools (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; MacLean, 2017; Spring, 2015).

Although none of these neoliberal theories had been proven, their ideas were adopted by powerful, global institutions who would benefit from them: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum (representing the world's wealthiest corporations) have contributed to the spread of neoliberalism worldwide (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Spring, 2015). In time, the language of the marketplace infiltrated discussions on education. Schools became part of the educational industry with students as consumers, parents as stakeholders, and teachers as producers (Fromm, 1976/2015; Spring, 2015). Schools are now seen as places of investment with the expectation that children will "spend" time in order to "earn" grades "get" an education and become "competitive" in the market place. In short, students are taught to believe that if they invest their time and money in their education, they will see a return on their investments (Foucault & Lotringer, 1996; Freire, 2000). Assessments in the form of standardized tests, teacher evaluations, and complicated formulas used to assess schools provide the hard evidence necessary in a positivist culture and serve as constant threats of accountability (Foucault, 1977).

Prior to the Cold War, the Chicago School of Economics had taught diverse economic theories; but with the advent of the Cold War and the associative fear of Communism, the Chicago School began emphasizing free-market principles and scientific mathematics in order to appear anti-communist and objective (Spring, 2015). Subsequently, schools became places in which economic metrics were increasingly used to provide evidence that students were receiving instruction and would leave school able to compete in the free market place. It is accepted practice today that students are assessed, sorted, and ranked based on their performance against

other students. Teachers are assessed and remunerated based on their students' performance and additional "objective" metrics, and schools are subject to a variety of assessments designed to identify the career and college-readiness of their students. These measurements are constructed as a means of comparing students, teachers, and schools and contribute to competition and the alienation and anxiety that accompany it.

Not only does neoliberalism serve to psychologically alienate an individual, but schools also physically isolate students. Students are segregated by age and from interactions with the community outside the school. The result is that young people --isolated and anxious -- are even more vulnerable to indoctrination to corporate values (Foucault, 1977; Foucault & Lotringer, 1996). They become brainwashed into believing that only subjects that provide a return on investment are worth studying and that their value as humans is adequately assessed by test scores.

Although we are encouraged to see students as consumers, I would argue that this is less about an economic exchange between student and school (an investment in time spent in return for a transcript) and more about the ways in which children have become standardized products cultivated and harvested for use by global corporations, politicians, and governments (Brown, 2015; Foucault & Lotringer, 1996; Spring, 2015; Watkins, 2001). Students are therefore not only being molded into consumers but into consumables – human capital to be exploited by those in power. This is a system of oppression designed to maintain and grow the power of the elite. It has become so ingrained in our society that it has become invisible. We accept it because we are told it is rational even though we witness the irrational and sordid ways in which devalues it human life and destroys our environment. We must look to alternative ways of thinking that can free us from the bounds of neoliberalism.

### Thinking Beyond the Bell Curve

Since the 1940s, neoliberalism has infiltrated all aspects of our lives. With that, we have been taught to believe it is sensible to apply market values to everything. But we must remember that neoliberalism is a rationality that has been nurtured by those who wish to profit from our objectification. It is not the only way of thinking about relationships; it is merely one way. Acentral, non-hierarchical models provide a more natural, democratic, and creative alternative to the hierarchical rigidly defined concepts presented by positivism and neoliberalism. Hidden (and often suppressed) within Western philosophy are philosophers who criticized dominant philosophies for presenting the very same limited modes of thought reflected in positivism's dependence on measurement and neoliberalism's dependence on market metrics. These philosophers shared a "critique of negativity, the cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the exteriority of forces and relations, [and] the denunciation of power" (Deleuze, 1977, p. 12). The ideas presented by Epicurus, Lucretius, Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, Feyerabend, Laszlo, and Barad provide us with opportunities to think outside and between the confines presented by the hegemonic beliefs perpetuated by capitalism.

Titus Lucretius Carus was a Roman poet and Epicurean born around 100 B.C. In his poem *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius suggested the world is ruled by the laws of nature rather than by heavenly deities. He argued there are no miracles, no deliberate actions that can be attributed to the deities. Like Epicurus, he believed that all elements of the universe are made of the same stuff; humans are no more no less than any other forms of matter. All of life is simply "an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space . . . colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction" (Greenblatt, 2011). Not surprisingly when the powerful Catholic Church re-

discovered his work in the 1400s, it fabricated a false narrative that Lucretius was insane and his death a suicide as a way of discounting his theories on the absence of divine intervention.

Similarly, Baruch Spinoza challenged the power and beliefs of the Judeo-Christian faith in his work, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, published in 1670. Spinoza's theories also suggest that all elements are made of the same substance and are therefore related. In *Ethics* (1677/2015), Spinoza extends this idea to suggest that if there is a God, then God is made of the same substance as all things; and therefore, all things are also divine. By stating that God is nature and nature is God, Spinoza came to the conclusion that there are no miracles, only natural laws which had not yet been discovered. He argued that those who believe in God are the fearful; those who need to believe there is plan. According to Spinoza, the purpose of theology is control. Spinoza's work was quite controversial, so much so that it led to charges of heresy and he asked that his final work, *Ethics*, be published after his death (Carlisle, 2011). Once again, those in power – the Catholic Church – suppressed alternative beliefs.

About 100 years after Spinoza, Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1740) also challenged persistent ideologies of the time in his anonymously published *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740/2011). In it, he argued that there was no significant difference between humans and beast; we are all subject to the laws of nature. He examined the psychological appeal of religion and asserted that religion was humanity's natural response to that which he could not explain. He dismissed miracles as unsubstantiated superstitions. Most importantly, Hume approached the "certainty" of science and mathematics with doubt asserting the problem of induction; i.e. just because something happened in the past does not guarantee it will happen again in the future.



Friedrich Nietzsche further challenges the idea of objective reality as “certainty”. He argues that “certain” knowledge is impossible as it is contingent and conditional based upon a person’s perspective and interests. Instead he argues that we look at things from as many perspectives as possible in order to find our own truth and be freed from others’ ideology (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*). This is complicated, he states, because the universe is constantly changing, everything is connected, and nothing is permanent. It is up to the individual to constantly reassess his or her experiences and understandings of the world. In short, no one perspective is superior to another as each value system is derived from perspectives and a universe that is constantly in flux (Nietzsche, Ansell-Pearson, & Large, 2006).

Henri Bergson similarly asserted that divergence and differentiation is our natural state. This includes the field of philosophy which, he argued, does not consist in choosing between concepts or in taking sides (1911/1998). Due to our dependence on our physical senses, humans tend to “perceive objects or qualities as static” even though everything is in a state of movement (1911/1998, p. 301). This habit of thinking and language “leads us to logical deadlocks” (p. 312). Rather than perceiving reality as a series of constant changes – of infinitesimally small vibrations -- we tend to mark progress mathematically measuring one thing in relation to another (Bergson, 1910). By only seeing the world from a fixed perspective, we miss the essentially qualitative nature of life that is in a state of constant movement and becoming. He develops this idea in *Creative Evolution* (1911/1998) by emphasizing the creative impulse essential to life itself and the tendency for things to diverge and differentiate in new ways.

### **Eliminating the Bell Curve**

By challenging the status quo, the philosophers noted above argue against a rigid positivist approach to the world and set the stage (or clear the stage) for more contemporary alternative perspectives. Advances in science, particularly in the field of quantum physics, has contributed to a growing awareness of the complexity and connectedness of our world and our limitations in defining and measuring these phenomena. Nobel Prize winning scientist, Niels Bohr (1962/2010) argued that conceptual frameworks are built upon prior experience, but that these frameworks can “prove too narrow to comprehend new experiences” (p. 67).

Similarly, Paul Feyerabend argues that a scientific approach to humanity “maims by compression” (1975/2010, p. 4). New ideas are discovered, he notes, either because some thinkers refuse to be bound by set methodological rules or they accidentally break the rules (Feyerabend, 1975/2010). Because all methodologies are limited by the circumstances under which they were created, we must acknowledge that our current knowledge is limited to our current technology (Feyerabend, 2001). As we advance in our understanding of the world, we will also advance methods of observation. He posits that “facts” exist that cannot be unearthed simply because the tools to unearth them do not yet exist (Feyerabend, 2001). This does not mean the facts aren’t there – only hidden; therefore, anything is possible. He further asserts that a methodology encouraging “variety is also the only method that is compatible with a humanitarian outlook” and the only method from which knowledge can be obtained (Feyerabend, 1975/2010, p. 25)

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari continued to push the metaphysical envelope. Like the philosophers noted above, Deleuze and Guattari argued that reality can be perceived from a variety of perspectives none of which is superior to the others. They argue that the emphasis on

quantitative data becomes another means of social control in addition to the more physical means of containment found in schools, prisons, and institutions. Quantitative data confines and reduces individuals and is based on theories also confined within a particular time and under particular circumstances. Positivism is therefore inherently flawed because the universe and our knowledge of it constantly change. Deleuze and Guattari (1987), push us to not only think beyond the box but to *eliminate* the box and create something entirely different. They argued the only power we can wield is the power of creation. As such, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer new ways of viewing the universe and opportunities to look between and beyond our fixed perceptions of the universe towards a curriculum of possibilities.

Deleuze & Guattari (1987) introduce us to a universe full of possibilities through rhizomatic theory, an acentral view of the multiple planes in which many heterogeneous elements synthesize new growth and connections. They envision these planes folding, unfolding, and refolding allowing for multiple permutations. Similarly, their perception of nomadic thought provides opportunity for multiple processes, multiplicities, connections, and growth. As such, nomad thought is not fixed, but alive - growing between and among other things. It is affirmative, liberating, and creative. Most importantly, Deleuze & Guattari (1987) present nomad thought as a possibility for expanded thought characterized by “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, [and] offshoots” (p. 21). It has no beginning or end; it is suggestive of creativity, diversity, and hope.

Similarly, Ervin Laszlo (2003) challenges conventional logic with a connectivity hypothesis that connects all living systems, the consciousness, and the cosmos. He predicts a revolution in scientific thought driven by quantum physics, biology, cosmology, and consciousness research which he terms “transdisciplinary theory” (p. 97). Laszlo discounts

physics based “theories of everything” as limited in scope; he predicts quantum physics, quantum biology, and quantum brain/consciousness research will demonstrate the ways in which all things are interpenetrating and interdependent – “intrinsically connected by subtle yet effective information conveyed by a fundamental virtual-energy field at the heart of a possible infinite metaverse” (2003, p. 101).

More recently, quantum physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad (2003, 2011) has constructed a theory of agential realism in which all matter (humans and nature) has importance and agency. In her theory, humans are de-centered and part and parcel of the universe. Relationships between material are multidirectional, and bio-political and bio-ethical issues regarding nature and humans are at the forefront. Because of the interagency between humans and nature, material details of everyday life are entangled with broader political and socio-economic structures. Barad (2011) encourages us to look for alternative ways of knowing beyond those which are normative and which fail to account for intra-actions between the material.

### **Cultivating the Groundwork for a Curriculum of possibilities**

These acentral non-linear philosophies presented by Lucretius, Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Feyerabend, Deleuze and Guattari, Laszlo, and Barad deconstruct the boundaries defined by a neoliberal rationality that reduces everything and everyone to a commodity in a competitive marketplace. They demonstrate that hierarchical beliefs are but an artificial method of organization and control centering certain humans. They strip rationality of its supposed logic and replace it with the embrace of uncertainty. In its place, these philosophers encourage us to see through and beyond the dominant ideology and its dependence on the fear of uncertainty as a means of control. They challenge the status quo of positivism’s stranglehold on our perceptions of reality and invite us to perceive differently and to be open to not knowing.

This flies in the face of humans' need for certainty and requires that we become comfortable in our unknowing. These ideas have been suppressed because they are in direct opposition to the status quo which those in power seek to maintain; yet, I am hopeful that discoveries in quantum physics provide the evidence necessary for us to become more comfortable with uncertainty and the freedom that it represents.

Rather than seeking certainty through an overdependence on positivist valuations, we should seek the freedom provided in the elimination of normative barriers. In doing so, I propose an alternative that presents a framework for a A which is acentric and non-hierarchical. In a curriculum of possibilities, there is no single element, idea, or quality that is more important than any other in the absolute; neither are elements and qualities necessarily organized from most to least importance. All ideas, elements, and qualities are of equal significance (Barad, 2003, 2011; Bergson, 1910, 1911/1998; Bowers, 2001; Carlisle, 2011; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Feyerabend, 2001, 2010; Greenblatt, 2011; Hume, 1740/2011; Orr, 2004; Spinoza, 2015). This means that humanity does not have dominance over the world, no one person has more inherent value than another; no discipline is superior to another; and in education, schools, families, and communities are equally important to the educational experience. An acentric, non-hierarchical curriculum allows for greater diversity of ideas, wider opportunities for engagement with others and with one's environment, and expanded participation in democracy (Hardt & Negri, 2017).

A curriculum of possibilities is non-materialistic; it does not focus on acquisition. Its emphasis on *being* rather *having* translates to education as an on-going experience rather than the accumulation of grades, skills, or knowledge as economic or intellectual collateral (Freire, 2000; Fromm, 1976/2015). A non-materialist curriculum of possibilities de-emphasizes the competition between students, teachers, and schools and opens opportunities for collaboration and sharing of

resources. As such, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of things and breaks down artificial barriers. A curriculum of possibilities recognizes the interconnectivity of all things. By doing so, it acknowledges that there are no boundaries; no restrictions – all things interact with and are part of each other. These connections – between humans and between humans and our environment – expand opportunities for students to make discoveries across disciplines, cultures, genres, and spaces thereby exploring many different opportunities for expanded knowledge (Barad, 2003, 2011; Bowers, 2001; Deleuze, 1962/1986; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Hardt, M. & Negri, 2017; Lazlo, 2003; Orr, 2004; Nietzsche, Ansell-Pearson, & Large, 2006).

An emphasis on interconnectedness demands an orientation that is multi-perspective, diverse, and non-reductionist: The diversity present in the world also represents the diversity of each living thing's experiences and qualities. A curriculum of possibilities greets this diversity with respect and recognizes the multiple perspectives with which individuals experience the world. This respect for the complexity of life demands humans and the environment not be reduced to data or mere economic value. This approach allows students to recognize the dynamism that is life. Students come to realize that in experiencing many different aspects of the world they will also experience relative success and failure coming to realize that there are no absolutes; nothing is fixed; everything in life is in flux. Therefore, they need never be locked into a status. This approach to education reflects a curriculum of abundant possibilities wherein an individual is not restricted by externally imposed criteria (Barad, 2003, 2011; Bergson, 1910, 1911/1998; Deleuze, 1962/1986; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Feyerabend, 1999, 2010; Hardt & Negri, 2017; Lazlo, 2003; Nietzsche, Ansell-Pearson, & Large, 2006).

This framework for a curriculum of possibilities values the diversity of humans, respects the connections between humans and the earth, and does so in a discourse of optimism and

courage. It eliminates barriers to democracy, freedom, individuality, creativity, growth, and hope. As such it is more representative of the reality in which we exist, rather than a rationality that reduces all things to economic terms.

## Chapter Three

### **Sprouting Out – Connections Between Philosophy and Praxis**

When profits are all that matter, human capital and material resources are only as valuable as the profits that can be generated from them. Neoliberal rationality has reduced individuals to human capital and nature to mere resources to be cultivated and harvested by those in power (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2013; Harvey, 2005; McLaren, 2000, 2002). By negating and objectifying human beings and their connection to the environment and to each other, we become confined by others' definitions and valuations of our worth. This negation of the individual is the key characteristic of a curriculum of deficit. But when we become unfettered from hierarchical value-laden descriptions of ourselves and the world around us, we become free to explore that which was previously undiscovered – this is a curriculum of possibilities; an organic ecosystem nurturing diversity, creativity, and connectivity. A reflection of the world in which we live -- a curriculum of possibilities -- is acentric and non-hierarchical, non-materialist, interconnected and unlimited, multi-perspectivist, diverse, and non-reductionist. This framework for a curriculum of possibilities values the diversity of humans, respects the connections between humans and the earth, and does so in a discourse of optimism and courage. It eliminates barriers to democracy, freedom, individuality, creativity, growth, and hope. As such it is more representative of the reality in which we exist, rather than a rationality that reduces all things to economic terms.

#### **The Educational Eco-System**

Science and philosophy provide us with alternative perspectives from which to view education as organic, natural, and unpredictable rather than the man-made industrial version perpetuated in America's public schools. Studies of quantum physics and the environment



suggest that acentricity, interconnectivity, and interdependence are more representative of our world than the hierarchical taxonomies we've come to accept (Bohr 1961/2010; Barad, 2003, 2011). In nature, all things have importance with none having priority over another. This is evident in the ways in which the introduction or removal of a single species can drastically alter an ecosystem. In education, this implies no one subject area has more weight than another; no student has privilege over another. Academic subjects (reading, math, science) are as important as the arts, athletics, and vocational skills. In a rhizomatic setting, courses would not be privileged based on the complexity of the course; and students, teachers, and schools would not be defined by positivist measures.

Instead, the curriculum map would be more akin to the nomadic lines of flight envisioned by Deleuze & Guattari – a map that is detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable with multiple entrances and exits (1987). A curriculum modeled after this concept would be opportunistic -- connecting individuals, disciplines, and environments demonstrating that “all of the topics entrusted to teachers and students in school can be understood as living fields, living inheritances, living places with ways and relationships and interdependencies . . .” (Jardin, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006, p. 144). As such, it would nurture creativity and bring together diverse individuals, experiences, abilities, and elements to create infinite combinations of ideas. It would employ an ethics of care. In effect, a curriculum of possibilities would bridge the intellect with the body and spirit fostering well-being, compassion, democracy, and hope.

To cultivate a learning environment that is detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable with multiple entrances and exits, we must break down the restrictive metaphorical and literal walls that challenge what we have come to believe is normal schooling. We must

engage our imaginations so that we can see the ways in which we are all interconnected and interdependent, and we must embrace and nurture our diversity seeing it for the strength that it is.

### **Control the Body; Control the Mind**

**Docile Bodies.** Public education is not engineered to encourage diversity, connectedness, or creativity. All of these threaten to unshackle and empower the masses. In response to the potential threat of having independent-minded, imaginative, and rebellious subjects; schools have become places designed to regulate bodies and minds (Foucault, 1977). We (students and teachers) are seasonal residents – temporary workers. We return like the swallows at the end of summer and vacate at the end of spring. We enter the building and are required to stay inside for eight hours, moving only in response to the sound of the bell. Within the school, we are segregated from our community, from our colleagues, and from one another. Teachers are relegated to specific geographic areas based on academic discipline. Students are segregated based on age and academic performance indicators. When the bell rings, my students leave the classroom and new students replace them. They enter the room and wedge their adult-size bodies into student desks designed to restrict their movement. Like roller coaster seats, they are locked in place. There they will sit for 55 minutes unable to move -- thirty-three adult-size students crammed into a classroom with 33 tiny desks and two teacher desks. With only six minutes allocated for them to move from class to class, most students elect to carry all their books rather than risk being late to class. Sometimes they dally in central meeting places to socialize. They sit in rows four to seven deep; their backpacks blocking the aisles. Their bodies block their vision. Our desks, our bodies, our belongings restrict our movement. We are physically confined. I am fortunate; my classroom has windows although they do not open. Our view is of the sky, the parking lot, and the roof of the cafeteria; but we are luckier than those in classrooms without

windows who are completely unaware of the world outside the room. After 55 minutes of confinement, the bell will ring and 33 bodies will try to shove their way through the narrow doorway and down the narrow halls. Aside from a brief walk across a sheltered courtyard to enter an adjacent building, students will spend eight hours within the school walls moving from one academic department to another and subjected to blocks of information seemingly disconnected from other academic disciplines. They walk like zombies staring at their cell phones as they attempt to connect with others as they peregrinate. In similar routine and brainless manner, schools have been designed to churn these students down the educational conveyor belt downloading identical data to all students regardless of a student's interest or comprehension.

**Docile Minds.** As our bodies become increasingly restricted, so do our minds. We come to see our school experiences as normal, and indeed the physically restricting elements of school have changed little in the past 100 years. This perpetuation of behavior lived by our students, their parents, and their grandparents has become taken for granted as defining qualities of American public schools. But today's public schools are much more confining than my parents' schools of the 1940s and 50s or even the schools of the 1960s and 70s that I attended. In the 1940s, the majority of the Americans had less than an eight-grade education (Snyder, 1993). By the 1950s, the number of Americans with high school diplomas had risen to about 50%; yet even by 1960 only 6 in 10 American men matriculated beyond the eighth grade (Snyder, 1993).

This is all to say that even though the design of schools has changed little in over 100 years, there was not as much pressure to attend and graduate public school in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What has changed, however, is the emphasis on normalizing judgments (Foucault, 1977). This is a direct consequence of America's emerging role as a military, industrial, and economic superpower. Following WWI and WWII, it was deemed essential and patriotic that

America be able to compete and win against other nations. Although education has always been political, it became more so. Programming of students to excel intensified. School days became longer, pressure to graduate intensified, and standardized testing took hold as a means to measure the competitiveness of American students. The curriculum changed to emphasize science, mathematics, and reading; and courses such “Americanism versus Communism” became required for graduation. The accountability movement has further inflamed the testing epidemic. Students, teachers, and schools are continually assessed to determine not only if they have deviated from the standard, but also to ensure that scores increase year after year. It is not good enough to be good; schools must show improvement regardless of how high last year’s scores were. Even though what happens in the classroom affects students and teachers most of all, we have no voice in the way our schools are organized or managed. In effect, we have confined students and teachers physically, mentally, and emotionally; we live in Foucault’s Panopticon (1977).

### **Imagination Without Boundaries**

Like the daydreaming student looking out the window, I am seeking alternatives – a place where education is joyful and alive, a place where we learn from and value each other, a place where we honor the divinity of all things. I imagine what rhizomatic educational experiences would look like, I think of places not restricted by time, place, space, or subject. In my mind’s eye, I knock down walls. I eliminate calendars and bell schedules. I send my mental roots shooting across my classroom, through the walls and windows, and out into the world. I connect with my students, their families, my colleagues, and my community; I reach into the woods and wade into the streams. To borrow from Ralph Waldo Emerson, I feel “part and parcel” of everything; I feel alive. Rhizomatic theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) provides these “lines of

flight” which allow us to not only break through hierarchical structures, but to see that these structures were never really there at all. The bell schedules, the concrete walls, the calendars, the academic disciplines, the tests were all constructed by those seeking to discipline, control, and harvest human resources. They are artificial constructs. Humans created these restraints; therefore, humans can disrupt them.

Rhizomatic theory offers a lens through which to see the possibilities open to resistance and growth. The rhizome is non-hierarchical and acentric. The absence of hierarchies and the de-centering of humans demonstrate the potential for us to connect with one another and with our environment. Because it is opportunistic, it resonates with us as humans. We, too, seek opportunities for growth and connection, yet most schools do not provide places for us to do so in meaningful ways. We are physically removed from the natural environment, detached from our community, segregated from other disciplines, and restrained from movement. To break down the barriers that separate us, we must look to that which connects and empowers us. If neoliberalism as rationality controls us, we should look to imagination to free us. If neoliberal measurements encourage competition between us, we must rebuke those values and embrace cooperation. And if neoliberalism seeks to destroy democracy, we must work to rebuild the demos. For everything that neoliberalism represents and espouses, we must seek out ways to disrupt and destroy it.

### **Spaces of Rupture**

**Connectivity through Care.** Neoliberalism seeks to devour all resources; a curriculum of possibilities seeks to protect and nurture life. This “relationship of mutual care” requires that we treat the world with mutual respect (Jensen, 2004, p. 113). In a culture built on the male-dominant ethics of the individual versus the feminist ethics of care, the powerful elite have

converted public office into wealth-producing venues, corporations into people, people into resources, and schools into job-training sites. An alternative approach – an ethics of care based on an ecological model of interconnectivity and interdependence in which “the opposites [male and female] are in balance [and] harmony is reached (Stewart qtd. in Jensen, 2004, p. 167).

Western patriarchal culture is the result of an interpretation of Genesis 1:26 which encourages a male-dominant culture of individualism. Virginia Held (2006) calls this “the most entrenched hierarchy there is” (location 286). As a result, the feminine voice has been silenced. By feminine, I mean the characteristics often associated with women: compassion, cooperation, and creativity rather than that of the dominant culture of alienation, domination, and destruction (Robinson, 1999). This imbalance in our socio-ecological setting has silenced the feminine voice forcing it to submit to the male (Held, 2006). However, we are not isolated beings, but living organisms intimately intertwined with our environment; yet, moralities structured around individualism “overlook the reality of human dependence and the morality for which it calls” (Held, 2006, location 85).

The polarity between an ethics of individualism and an ethics of care is the result of a rationality focused on personal wealth and power, blinded to the reality of the relationships which support us all. An ethics based on individualism seems to assert that man sprung to life fully grown, reliant on no one. Those who are not independent are seen as weak. Darwinian justice rules. By failing to acknowledge our interdependencies and by being dismissive of the idea of care, those in power have chosen to ignore the needs of others. Held (2006) asserts that “feminists have shown how the greater social, political, economic, and cultural power of men has structured this ‘private’ sphere to the disadvantage of women and

children, rendering them vulnerable . . .” (location 131). An ethics of care acknowledges that all humans have been and probably will be dependent upon others. Feminists, however, see persons as interrelated and interdependent. An ethics of care focuses not only on the needs of those for whom we have direct responsibility but also extends to all human relationships, our environment, and social institutions such as schools (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2012).

In our highly militarized and segregated culture, fear and isolation reign. To acknowledge the weakness of others reveals the weakness within ourselves. It becomes difficult to cultivate compassion when the dominant cultural messages “promote instead the values of egoism, competition, and the victory of the fittest” (Held, 2006, location 657). Not surprisingly in a militarized and segregated environment, it is the “other” who suffers most (women, children, LBGTQ, immigrants, and African- Americans to name a few). Dr. Judith Herman, an expert on the effects of psychological trauma, reports that in “a predatory and militaristic culture ...to behave in a predatory and exploitative way is not deviant” as long as the person is a legitimate victim (Jensen, 2004, p. 349). By legitimate, Herman means “a person who may be attacked with impunity” (p. 349) which I translate to mean as someone of no economic value to the dominate culture.

I would argue that the rise in violence and individualism are a reflection of an imbalance in the dominant male and female approaches to ethics. If the dominant male hegemony got us into this mess, can an approach towards equilibrium get us out? Einstein reminds us that “the significant problems of the world cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which they were created” (qtd. in Jensen, 2004, p. 326). It is time for something different. It is time to replace narcissism with the ethics of care “critical in building a society for the common good” (Apple, 1988, p. 284).

The dominant Western ideology emphasizing the “independent, autonomous, rational individual largely overlook[s] the reality of human dependence and the morality for which it calls” (Held, 2006, location 91). But as history and science demonstrate, we are not independent, autonomous beings; our actions ripple across our physical and social environments and can have positive and destructive consequences that may remain hidden for years (Carson, 1962; Jensen, 2004; Williams, 1991). If we accept the fact that diversity is beneficial, indeed essential, in nature; then it would seem obvious that humans – as living creatures and part of the ecosystem – also require diversity. It is within this diversity that we find “the inherent stability of nature” (Carson, 1962, p. 74). Failure to adapt and embrace diversity within either ecological or socio-ecological models ultimately results in extinction (Carson, 1962; Williams, 1991).

It seems apparent that a Western culture which simultaneously emphasizes the importance of the individual all the while restraining the individuality of that person is destined to create internal conflict and tension. Therefore, it is not surprising that schools have been the site of so much violence or that the majority of shootings are not committed in heterogeneous schools but in schools which are predominately White and middle-class – places where “those who are different are easily marginalized” (Harding, Fox, & Mehta, 2002). For many students, schools have become prison-like and places of emotional and physical violence, particularly for minorities (Collins, 2009; Watts & Erevelles, 2004).

Our schools are commonly referred to as an educational system: “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole” ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)). I would argue that schools are more than mere systems; they represent a complex, sometimes chaotic, socio-ecosystem filled with fragile young lives. Humans – like everything else in our ecosystem – are not predictable; there are many factors, many catalysts, which can quickly



alter our environments. Western rationality demands a logic and predictability which simply do not exist in a classroom of 32 teenagers and definitely not in a school of over 2,000. This conflict between human nature and a mathematical accountability places teachers and students in a losing proposition. Within this socio-ecological setting, students and teachers are impacted by not only the educational system (policies, procedures, laws), but also their social, cultural, and physical environments. Instead, an ecological approach to education acknowledges “all living things...exist in a relation of interdependence and mutual benefit” (Carson, 1962, p. 78). An examination and application of a socio-ecological perspective combined with an ethics of care acknowledges the importance of relationships, systems, catalysts, diversity, and sustainability. As Kozol (1991) points out, platitudes such as “all children can learn” dismiss the reality that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a child who is hungry, pregnant, abused, depressed, or drugged to learn. Candy-coated phrases such as these are attempts to over-simplify and disguise the real problems our children face – one of which is the education system itself.

Our present system of cannibalistic education is morally irresponsible; it separates rather than connects us (Held, 2006). Instead of capitalizing on the weaknesses of the young through pedagogy of industrialism, we should be tending to their creative growth through an ethics of care: “We must become caretakers, guardians, trustees, [and] nurturers” (Stewart qtd. in Jensen, 2004, p. 162). It is the ethics of care that “offers suggestions for the transformation of society” (Held, 2006, location 131). It recognizes “persons as relational and interdependent” (Held, 2006, location 153). As such, it becomes a socio-ecological model reflecting the complexity of our relationships and the far-reaching implications of our actions.

Held (2006) argues that instead of a society dominated by conflict restrained by law and preoccupied with economic gain, we might have a society that saw as its most important task the

flourishing of children and the development of caring relations, not only in personal contexts but among citizens and government institutions. We would see that instead of abandoning culture to the dictates of the marketplace, we should make it possible for culture to develop in ways best able to enrich human life (Held, 2006, location 232). We must become a society of caretakers and guardians in order to safeguard our children and our planet. Some may argue that an ethics of care is idealist; however, we need only look around to see that caring is a more natural way of interacting with one another and a more sensible way of interacting with our environment. The ethics of care is an ethics of optimism, empowerment, creativity, and social justice (Held, 2006). A care perspective helps to illuminate the positive interactions between ourselves and others when we focus on the needs of others. Application of an ethics of care requires that we are not quiet to the damage done to others: “By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?” (Carson, 1962, p. 100). By applying the ethics of care, Held (2006) suggests:

Instead of seeing the corporate sector, and military strength, and government and law as the most important segments of society deserving the highest levels of wealth, a caring society might see the tasks of bring up children, educating its members, meeting the needs of all, achieving peace and treasuring the environment, and doing these in the best ways possible to be that to which the greatest social efforts of all should be devoted.  
(location 245)

For teachers, this means we must trust ourselves to put the interests of our students first. We can acknowledge that we are part of a complex ecosystem in which we depend upon each other and the environment and teach this to our students. Because of our interconnectedness, we must treat ourselves and each other with respect as the repercussions of our words and actions

can be far reaching (Carson, 1962; Jensen, 2004; Williams, 1991). We can recognize that diversity is essential to our survival. Rather than coercing students into mainstream behaviors, we can embrace the variety of their ideas, cultures, and personalities. Noddings (2012) reminds us that ours is a diverse society in which people “perform a huge variety of tasks, have hundreds of different interests, hold a variety of precious values” (p. 190). Rather than forcing a standardized “one size fits all” curriculum, she suggests schools “legitimate multiple models of excellence, e.g. mechanical, artistic, physical, productive, academic, and caretaking” (Noddings, 2012, p. 190).

An ethics of care re-introduces a feminine ethic that provides a balance into our socio-ecological environment and “offers suggestions for the radical transformation of society” (Held, 2006, location 124). Unlike the dominant narcissistic perspective, an ethics of care legitimizes our interconnectedness and calls for deliberate care and respect for others. It is an ideology which is sustainable and abundant in its rewards: “Care is the price of an inexhaustible richness” (Harrison, 2009, p. 18). When we care, we pay attention, we connect, we nurture, we protect, and we promote the growth of that which love.

### **Our Relation to the Aesthetic.**

The arts provide space for us to experience care whether as the creator or the one experiencing art. If we approach art with care – with what Maxine Greene (2001) would call “wide-awakeness” – we are open to it “ready to see new dimensions, new facets of the other, to recognize the possibility of some fresh perception or understanding” (p. 54). The arts invite us on an adventure of imaginative speculation that promises “there is always more” (Greene, 2001, p. 56).

Elliott Eisner (2002) reminds us that life is a qualitative experience – an experience created through our senses. Neoliberalism, however, defines everything in economic, quantifiable terms. To disrupt this rationality, we must look towards that which is experienced through our senses. As Eisner says, “The senses are our first avenues to consciousness” (2002, location 86). They provide us with ways of awakening to the world around us. This is the place of imagination and hope. This is the place of art. The arts give us avenues of flight for our imagination. Our senses, stimulated by the imaginative and provocative representations of the arts, provide us with places to see beyond the constructs of the neoliberal rationality – a rationality that discourages the imagination because imagination stimulates change and challenges the status quo. It is no surprise that both the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) have been under attack since Reagan’s presidency, but President Donald Trump plans to entirely defund both organizations (Genoways, 2017). After all, art is messy, chaotic, and resistant to controls. For this reason, art has a long history of awakening the world, challenging the status quo, and providing voices of resistance whether it was Francisco Goya mocking the Spanish monarchy in *Charles IV of Spain and His Family*, Diego Rivera challenging capitalism through his rebellious mural for Rockefeller Center, or Kanye West protesting White supremacy in his song, “New Slaves.” Art provides a space and a voice to counter-narratives.

In a neoliberal world, the arts have no place unless they bring profit. Schools, under pressure to be economically efficient, have under-funded both the fine and manual arts. Instead, schools focus on improving test scores all while cutting costs. The school where I teach has two fine art teachers for a school population of over 2,200 students. English language electives – journalism, creative writing, film studies – have disappeared. Part of the problem is students are

driven to enroll in “rigorous” courses in order to be more competitive when applying to college. This goes back to the neoliberalist belief that each individual is responsible for investing in his or her own economic value. Art classes and student-chosen electives don’t “make sense” in a rationality that only serves profit even though students tell me they want to take art classes. They explain there is no time in their schedules. The removal of class size limits has also impacted the school’s ability to offer arts classes and for teachers to provide enriching and creative assignments. The art instructors at my high school have more than 40 students in each of their classes. I personally have seen my English classes increase from 21 students for each honors class to 33. In effect, I have two more classes than I did before yet my time to plan lessons and assess my students’ work is unchanged. In response, I provide fewer opportunities for student writing and even less for creative work. I simply don’t have the time – that is of course if I agree to live in the small and rigid space provided by a neoliberal ideology. If I remove those barriers, I see where the arts can take us.

### **Liberating the Mind Through the Arts.**

The arts provide us with ways to expand our minds in limitless directions. It is the epitome of nomadic thought. When I pick up my paintbrush, I delve into and out of my own imagination. What will I paint? How do I envision it? What colors will I use? Where will I start? When I sketch, I begin in the center. When I use watercolor, I must think of building light onto dark. When I use oils, I move from dark to light. I must envision the final product and reverse the ways in which I will arrive at my destination. I must also allow the medium space to create. Surprises happen. Some are horrific and, in watercolor, disastrous. At other time, these accidents are delightful surprises (Eisner, 2002).

Art also causes me to live in the practical. How will the paper respond to the water and the paint? Which brush will provide the desired effect? How long will it take the paint to dry? Art causes me to slow down, to look at something in a different way, and to pay attention to the details and the bigger picture. When I draw or paint, I must look at something which is three-dimensional and create in two-dimensions. When I am at the potter's wheel, I must be responsive to the desire of the clay to form itself. Creative works are complex and challenge the mind in ways that are not available through the memory and regurgitation of known information. In art, one is creating information – information that is communicated through the senses and which also impacts the emotions. To create, the artist must be willing to move into the space of the negative, embrace the unknown, and be receptive to what is found there. This can be scary for those who have been taught to seek certainty and perfection. I see fear in my high school students' faces when I ask them to illustrate a stanza of poetry so that they might see the imagery or emotion shared by the author. It is hard for them to let go and experience art. How unfortunate that rather than enjoying creating art as little children do; by high school, they fear being graded and found lacking.

The unquantifiable aspect of art is unsettling not only because it represents the freeing of the mind, but it also extends the author's reach outside of the work itself. It opens a dialogue between artist and the audience (Greene, 2001). It is as if the artist reaches out of the painting and grabs hold of us. Art touches us. It moves us both metaphorically and literally. Art is not some something deposited in our brains for us to recall at a later date for a standardized test. Art is something we experience; it is a "living place, a living field of relations" (Jardin, et al., 2006). Each time we return to the piece of art, we see it from a different perspective because although it may not have changed, we have. It draws us into the present and invites us to respond. We

develop a relationship through our sensory experience of it. Eisner notes, “The arts depict not only what is heard; they also depict what is felt” (2002, location 271). It is a way for us to communicate with one another without having to use words. It expands our perspectives and alters the way we think, feel, and see the world. The world slows down. We begin to pay attention to the nuances of the world and to delight in its beauty. We come to appreciate the complexity of our surroundings. The veil is removed. If an anesthetic is that which numbs us, it is the aesthetic that is its opposite; the aesthetic awakens us (Eisner, 2002).

### **Connectivity through the Environment.**

Similar places of mindfulness occur when we are surrounded by the beauty of nature. When we are outdoors, our senses are stimulated by the noise, the scents, the sights, the textures, and the tastes of life. The outdoors, gardens in particular, “become places of rehumanization in the midst of, or in spite of, the forces of darkness” (Harrison, 2009, p. 42). Unlike art, which can only simulate nature, our engagement with the environment provides a multi-dimensional experience. The cold beauty of a marble statute will never compare with the sensation of warm, smooth skin. Similarly, Jan Davidszoon de Heem’s *Still Life with Fruit and Ham* (1648-49) – the luscious fruit partially peeled, the ham carved and waiting – yearns to be tasted with more than just the observer’s eyes. This is not to say of course that art is incomplete. No. Art communicates differently. It has the ability to communicate metaphorically and emotionally with humans, but nature communicates with every living thing. When we become detached from our environment, and worse, when we come to see ourselves as having dominion over nature, we forget our place -- one that is relatively new given the age of the planet. Taught to believe that we have “dominion over all living things” (Genesis 1:26), humans have corrupted this to mean that we are superior to other living things rather than having stewardship. This has led to our

reckless abuse of other species. Thanks to humans, the extinction rate is 1,000 times higher than it would be if we were not in the picture (Pimm, Jenkins, Abell, Brooks, Gittleman, Joppa, Raven, Roberts, & Sexton, 2014).

In order to survive our self-induced destruction, humans must wake up to the havoc we have wreaked. We must re-establish relationships with the environment and with each other. Human diversity and diversity of agricultural knowledge may hold the key to our species survival (Bowers, 2001). According to Stephen A. Marglin (1996), “there can be no agriculture that is not agriculture of the people, agriculture by the people” (p. 26). The source of our species survival will be in tapping into agricultural knowledge handed down from generation to generation that takes into account how to find ecological balance. This knowledge, also known as “organic science”, evolved over generations and encompasses the learnings of how to work *with* the environment in order to sustain life (Bowers, 2001, p. 42).

Unlike mechanistic agriculture which focuses on increasing harvest yields, organic science represents a close personal working relationship with the land, one in which society understands the important interdependencies of the relationship. Unlike economic production which transfers wealth back to producers, eco-systemic production returns resources back to the natural community – all living things benefit, not only those in power (Jensen, 2004). It is not a relationship based on dominance of one species over another, but a delicate and respectful awareness of the ways in which one species affects another. This organic wisdom includes knowledge of the nutritional and medicinal properties of plants and minerals and weaves together “tradition, intergenerational responsibility, mutuality within the community, and a clear understanding of human dependency on ecosystems that are subject to rapid and unpredictable changes” (Bowers, 2001, p. 44). Given human’s desire for certainty in the face of nature’s



unpredictability, attentiveness to organic knowledge provides humans with a possibility of survival. After all, “Evolution is non-hierarchical” (Jensen, 2006, p. 4). We can no longer pretend that our actions are without consequences.

### **The Strength of Uncertainty in the Arts, Nature, and Care**

In our human quest for certainty, we’ve turned away from that which makes us most alive— those things that connect us to one another and to our environment. These experiences – the arts, the environment, caring for one another – make us awaken to our vulnerabilities, our interdependencies. In all cases, we return to the importance of care – something which is in short supply in a dog-eat-dog neoliberal world.

To me, care is equivalent to love. Care makes us vulnerable to one another because it affirms our interdependency. In our society, this is seen as weakness, yet care is evident in everything that has intrinsic value. Care is exhibited by the parents tending to a young child. Care is demonstrated by the sculptor who delicately chisels away at the block of marble. Care is given by the gardener who patiently nourishes the soil, plants the seeds, and defends the seedling. As Robert Pogue Harrison asserts, “Care is accustomed to act, to take the initiative, to stake its claims, yet powerlessness and even helplessness are as intrinsic to the lived experience of care as the latter’s irrepressible impulse to act, nurse, and promote” (2009, p. 27). To care is to expose ourselves to potential pain, but care is also “the price of an inexhaustible richness” (Harrison, 2009, p. 18).

## Chapter Four

### Rhizomatic Theory & Social “Grassroots” Activism

Until reading Deleuze and Guattari (1987), my understanding of “grassroots” meant a movement, typically political, originating from ordinary people and starting from the ground up; but now, my experiences as graduate student and a political activist, combined with my interpretation of rhizomatic theory, have led me to see the ways in which individual “nodules” seek out others; and in the process, strengthen themselves, their allies, and their joint networks of resistance. These processes of social activism described below contain elements that will be used to theorize a curriculum of possibilities – an abundance emerging from the diversity, energy, and connectivity of a community.

This became strikingly evident last fall when I became involved with a liberal women’s group in the northern suburbs of a major Southern capital. In the past year, this group, Liberal Suburban Moms (a pseudonym) has grown from about 100 women to almost 2,000 members. Members from the original group have branched out to create additional groups – Blue Wave (BW) a group of over 4,000 women focused on identifying, training, and electing progressive political candidates; and Colors of the Palette (CP) which consists of about 400 women who meet on and off-line to explore and discuss sensitive issues about race. Of the 4,000 women in Blue Wave, 14 members have since declared their candidacy for a local or state election and an additional two are already in elected office and are running for higher office. Blue Wave members serving as campaign managers, financial directors, or field volunteers staff all 16 candidates. These groups, their members, and their members’ relationships with one another and with allied groups represent the acentricity, heterogeneity, and multiplicities envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). My membership in these three groups and their ally groups has led

me to conclude that rhizomatic theory as applied to the area of social relationships provides abundant opportunities for social and political engagement of “underground” movements and subsequent resistance against dominant power blocs. It is an assemblage of like-minded groups along a political and social plane that has no center yet is stronger because of it.

### **Nodular Roots**

Last August, I signed in to Facebook and discovered a neighbor had taken the liberty of enlisting me in a progressive Facebook group for mothers living in my area – a group I will call Liberal Suburban Moms (LSM). I was surprised not only to have been volunteered to join this group without my knowledge, but also to discover there were other progressive neighbors nearby. I had spent over 20 years in what I believed to be a conservative, religious, suburban bubble where Republicans run unopposed and the term “liberal” is equated with “Commie.” For example, the school district where I live and work spent thousands of dollars applying stickers to biology textbooks identifying evolution as “only a theory.” The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) is the largest club at school and mission trips are excused absences. Needless to say, I felt outnumbered. When I discovered there were other liberals in my district, I was delighted to find I was not alone.

From the anonymity of my computer, I searched the member rosters looking for other closet liberals who, like me, had been too scared to come out as progressive for fear of retribution at work or from neighbors. Other than the woman who had enlisted my husband and me, I knew no one. I waited and watched, fearful of being “outed” even though the group was a “secret” group and visible only to members. As the presidential election neared, members’ postings increased with many linking articles of political interest. The group provided space for disagreement and counter-argument. Members were free to discuss our opinions without fear of

being silenced. Through our shared news articles and responses, we became “connected knowers” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule; 1986). By the time Bernie Sanders lost the Democratic nomination for president, it was obvious that the majority of women in LSM had decided to throw their support behind Hilary Clinton.

In late September, it was time for LSM to step away from the anonymity of the Internet and make a public appearance. The leaders of the group planned a pro-Clinton rally at the busiest intersection in the area. Encouraged by their enthusiasm and numbers, I decided to join them albeit I went incognito wearing a hat and large sunglasses for fear of retaliation by parents or students at the school where I work. As, Audre Lorde (1984) notes, “The transformation of silence into language is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (p. 42). I worried that I would be recognized and challenged by my neighbors, students, or their parents; but I also knew that I could no longer be silent. To be silent implied consent, and it was time to find my voice.

Although I expected perhaps 20 women to attend, more than 200 women were there joined by their partners and children. It was an epiphany for me. I was not alone. I was surrounded by 200 people whom I had never met in person but with whom I had formed political and emotional connections. The knowledge of being in solidarity with like-minded individuals was empowering and inspiring. I began attending local Democratic Party meetings for the first time in almost 30 years. I renewed my membership in both the Democratic Party and the Democratic women’s organization. I developed working relationships with the leaders in my local party, serve on the policy and advocacy committee, and became a precinct captain. I learned the names and addresses of everyone in my neighborhood that had ever voted for a Democratic candidate. I knocked on doors, made phone calls, and held potluck get-togethers and

post-card writing parties. I attended direct action training held by a like-minded group (Stand Up for Racial Justice) so that I would know what to do in case of arrest and how to use my White privilege to protect others. I learned how to effectively use Twitter to magnify my voice and community. In effect, I came out of the closet as a liberal social activist.

By the time of the presidential election of 2016, LSM had several hundred members; but with the election of Donald Trump, our numbers skyrocketed. The election of a candidate who had bragged about sexually assaulting women was more than many could quietly endure. There was a need among many of us to connect with other women and to become actively involved politically and socially. LSM provided not only a safe place to discuss politics and angst over Trump's election, but it also became a place of resistance (Collins, 2000). When our membership exceeded 1,000 women, it became necessary to create committees to ensure that members' interests and needs would be met. I served on the political action committee, but we also formed a service and outreach committee, social committee, and several book clubs. Our members were a diverse group representing women from a variety of economic, educational, professional, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Our members included doctors, realtors, lawyers, marketing and finance executives, musicians, artists, personal trainers, and educators. Furthermore, members had connections to other like-minded groups: Mothers Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, Planned Parenthood, Indivisible Georgia, Georgia Progressives, Sixth District Task Force, Standing Up for Racial Justice, Democratic Socialists of America, and a variety of churches, synagogues, and mosques. Membership had only one requirement – members had to be mothers.

**Political Repercussions and Vacant Seats.** Trump's election caused a ripple effect in LSM territory. His election and subsequent nomination of Georgia 6<sup>th</sup> District Congressman Tom

Price to the position of Secretary of Health and Human Services in late November 2016 left Price's Congressional seat open and provided focus for us. We immediately began organizing to identify and support a progressive candidate. Democrat, Jon Ossoff, announced he was running for Price's seat on January 5, 2017. Ossoff had strong financial support and the backing of Congressmen John Lewis and Hank Johnson. He was poised, well educated, and spoke in a style reminiscent of Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy. Most of the LSM women quickly mobilized behind Ossoff. We obtained voter information rolls, held house parties, knocked on doors, telephoned voters, and had voter registration drives. LSM merchandise was designed and sold: t-shirts, buttons, and car magnets. Because many of us only knew each other through Facebook, we developed creative ways of identifying each other in public. If we saw an LSM car magnet in a parking lot, we would flip it upside down to let another re-sister know she was not alone. We painted our pinkie fingernail blue and wore pins designed by an LSM member. Although these gestures seem trivial, they served to let us know that there were other LSM sisters nearby if needed. Because we lived in a hostile environment, it was comforting to know we were not alone.

The support of the LMS sisterhood is broad, deep, and strong. One of our members, Jane Scadden (pseudonym), is the mother of a transgender daughter. Because of her activism in support of her daughter, she was called upon to speak at the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) gala. The event was posted on the LSM site and there was a lot of interest in reserving tickets to support Scadden and the HRC. I posted that I wanted to attend because I sponsor the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at my school; but because I was a teacher, I could not afford the \$250.00 ticket. My re-sisters rallied. Members pulled together to buy a ticket for me and for the GSA president. Encouraged by their generosity, I contacted the HRC and asked if they would

provide me with a free ticket so that I could also bring another GSA student. They agreed, and I was able to bring two students to this formal event in support of LGBTQ+ rights. In the banquet hall of almost 1,000 people; my students were the youngest people present. As I sat between my two students listening to guest speaker, actor Dan Bucantinsky and his husband Don Roos, one of the students leaned over, tears in his eyes, and whispered, “That’s all I really want in life. To be loved and have my own family.” I was, and am, filled with joy that this night demonstrated to my students the possibilities and support that are available to them. Because a desire on my part was met by my LSM sisters, we also created and strengthened connections between and beyond my relationships with LSM and my students. These two students now feel empowered and encouraged to live the life they have been given. They feel hope. This is a curriculum of possibilities and one that was created by my connections with LSM.

**National Attention.** By the time of the Democratic National Committee Chairmanship election in Atlanta on February 25<sup>th</sup>, LSM was recognized as a powerful ally and phenomenon in the 6<sup>th</sup> district. Our leadership team was invited to speak at the Women’s Caucus and we had the opportunity to meet and exchange contact information with influential players in the national Democratic Party. But tension between the three key LSM leaders was developing. Marie, who founded LSM, wanted to return the group to its original purpose – providing support for liberal mothers; but the other two leaders, Laura and Jan, saw the group emerging as a political powerhouse. A rift developed. In March, Laura and Jan were removed from LSM and founded a new political organization, Blue Wave (BW).

**Blue Wave Rising.** Those of us who had been most politically active in LSM were excited to form a new organization focused entirely on political and social justice issues. Although this was a very emotionally tense time for many in the group, I was not concerned. It is

not uncommon for groups to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct in new ways as they evolve and develop (Hunter, 2015). None of these simply appears out of nowhere; there first must be a will to power – an organic desire for life and freedom – a nodule of opportunity seeking growth whether that is literal as in the case of the rhizome or personal, social, intellectual, and political as was the case with we women (Nietzsche, 1886; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As I see it, movements, groups, and networks are very similar to rhizomes; they connect, disconnect, and reconnect as part of the natural growth process (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

At our first Blue Wave meeting, about thirty women – all from LSM – came together to discuss our next steps. Initially, there were to be four group leaders – Laura, Jan, Nadine, and Nina -- each assigned specific duties. Laura would head up our activism efforts. Nadine would be in charge of community relations, inclusion, and diversity efforts. Jan would be our director of communications, and Nina would provide additional executive support. By then, I had connections to many allied groups, so I became a member of the liaison team and the education team. My job was to form alliances with like-minded groups and to share information in order to advance liberal causes. By doing so, we were able to extend our reach, support our allies, and progress our agenda.

From March to June, the primary focus of Blue Wave was to fill the ballot with progressive candidates and get them elected. Our primary objective was to aid Jon Ossoff in his bid to fill the vacancy left by Tom Price's appointment as Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). Ossoff was not the only candidate running, however. He was one of 18 candidates including Georgia State Senator, Judson Hill, who had to resign in order to run for office. Hill's resignation resulted in a special election for the Georgia senate district 32 seat, and



a Blue Wave candidate, Kristin Dooley (pseudonym), declared her intent to run for her first elected position.

The Wavers (as we came to call ourselves) rallied behind both Dooley and Ossoff in traditional and non-traditional ways. We phone-banked and canvassed door-to-door, but we also developed creative ways of bringing attention to the elections while reminding voters that Republicans were not the only residents of these districts. It seemed that our courage to announce we were liberals living in this historically conservative district gave others the courage to join us. In the span of three months, we grew from 30 to 4,000 members.

As we grew in numbers and notoriety, we also became emboldened by the creativity, innovation, and energy of our members. With 4,000 members, our numbers and passion allowed us to act quickly and effectively. We became a nimble pro-active organization able to respond quickly and effectively to any member's call to action. A Facebook post calling for "pop up" rallies at strategic locations through the 6<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> districts would result in hundreds of women descending on high-traffic intersections wearing their Blue Wave shirts and pro-Ossoff and Dooley signs. A "sign ninja" event would result in 70-80 women dressed in black convening at midnight in supermarket parking lots to orchestrate the planting of hundreds of our candidates' signs. Members dressed up as dinosaurs in tutus and distributed blue eggs with Ossoff stickers in them at public Easter egg hunts. We even acquired a party bus; had it wrapped in red, white, and blue vinyl with "Ossoff" in large letters, and drove it around the 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional district. In true rhizomatic style, we were a force of nature -- seizing opportunities, seeking relationships, and creating opportunities for growth (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Not surprisingly, our organization would occasionally butt heads with county Democratic leadership or with Ossoff's campaign as we replaced traditional political campaign with our own ideas. In short time,

however, the establishment leadership surrendered to our activist style. Even the leadership team of Blue Wave surrendered to the power and energy of the women in the group. Like the rhizome, we were opportunists and hard to suppress.

Because of my sponsorship of the student Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at the school where I teach, I was tapped by the Georgia Stonewall Caucus (an LGBTQ+ group aligned with the State Democratic Party) to host an LGBTQ+ family-oriented party for Jon Ossoff. I agreed even though I do not have a home suitable for this type of affair, and I've never held an event (not even my own wedding) for over 100 people. I turned to my Blue Wave sisters on Facebook: "Was anyone willing to host the event and were others willing to help me organize it"? Within 30 minutes, I received word from a Waver who knew a married couple who lived in the district, were gay, and were willing to host the event. My team of organizers and I met with the couple and their family and worked out the logistical details. My co-chair, Patti, posted a link on the Blue Wave Facebook site that allowed Wavers to volunteer to staff the event, provide supplies, or donate money. We were inundated with volunteers, food, and the cash needed to buy non-donated items. Women who did not have the means to purchase goods or donate items pitched in to supervise children's activities. Women with culinary skills prepared food and those with floral design expertise donated flower arrangements. Students from my GSA brought gay pride flags and manned the sign-in table for guests. Wavers reached out to their connections in Gay Fathers of Atlanta, the Human Rights Campaign, Georgia Equality, and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). In sum, we had approximately 150 people attend the event.

The success of this event resulted in Georgia Representative Sam Park – the first openly gay man to be elected to Georgia's General Assembly – requesting my help in organizing a meet and greet for the Asian-American community two days later. Although this should have seemed

daunting, I knew that I could call on the women of Blue Wave to support this effort – and they did. My connection to and support of Representative Park later led to my introduction to Bee Nguyen, Park’s former campaign manager, who has recently announced her candidacy for Georgia house district 89. Nguyen and her campaign chairperson, Adrienne White, also provided candidacy-training events to Blue Wave members. Both women are now members of Blue Wave.

Other connections I made at this one LGBTQ+ campaign event resulted in the development of a friendship with a lesbian married couple of color; both of who are the daughters of ministers. I asked Trina and Dale (pseudonyms) to visit our GSA as featured speakers. I believed their experiences of intersectionality would provide the multiplicities and perspectives also reflected in our GSA. Trina and Dale shared the story of their coming out to family and of their romance, marriage, and children. Then they opened the floor to questions and there were many. As someone who is heterosexual and cis-gendered, I do not always feel qualified to address my students’ concerns; I was grateful Trina and Dale, having lived through similar experiences as my students, were able to help. This connection to Trina and Dale enriched my students’ and my knowledge, expanded our networks of support, and provided the acknowledgement needed by these young people that they too could find happiness and acceptance.

### **Networks upon Networks**

A year ago, I felt scared and discouraged – until I established a network of support and activism. It began with a nodule of hope within myself – a “will to power” (Nietzsche, 1886). By reaching out in “creative lines of flight”, I joined with others also in search of connection (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 422). Our connections to each other and to other allied, but diverse

groups, created a network that is “open and connectable,” “detachable,” “reversible, susceptible to constant modifications,” and have “multiple entryways” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12). Each of us brought with us diverse interests and relationships to multiple communities. By forming relationships with individuals within each of the communities of which I am a member, I also connected to those individual’s communities. Each time I make a connection to another group, my network and myself became stronger. I benefited from having connected with and learning from an unfamiliar group, but both the group and myself benefited by our joint interaction and support of one another.

#### **Implications for a Curriculum of Possibilities**

My experiences over the past year have demonstrated to me the power of the rhizome and the abundant, powerful, and creative opportunities that emerge when individuals come together in solidarity for a greater good. The women in my networks sought each other out as a means of resisting a toxic political and social environment. These initial contacts multiplied as each woman invited her network of friends to become entangled (Barad, 2003, 2011) with us. From one person’s contacts, talents, and interests sprouted additional resources. It has inspired me to see how rhizomatic experiences can provide a framework for teaching and empowering students. When we nurture others’ strengths and creativity, we provide space for growth. As Henry Miller says, “The weed lives the most satisfactory life of all” (1939, p. 105).

## Chapter 5

### **Thinking Organically – Creating Places and Spaces of Learning Between & Beyond**

My experiences in social activism which emerged from my membership in Blue Wave sparked my imagination as to what would be possible in public schools if we employed an organic rhizomatic approach to education – if we were able to challenge the status quo of existing institutions in ways that emerged organically, responded creatively, demonstrated love, and acted democratically. If schools embraced the diversity, connectivity, and creativity possible when people worked together for a common goal, would our students be empowered to pursue their “lines of flight?” (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1986). Could we create loving, supportive environments which fostered imagination, compassion, and collaboration? Schools emulating these ideals are not untried. From Dewey’s laboratory school to today, educators have strived to find solutions to the tensions inherent in teaching (Freire, 2000; hooks, 2003, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meier, 1995/2002; Semel & Sadovnik, 2006). Are we indoctrinating our students, subjecting them to our own ideas? How do we guide students, yet avoid controlling them? Ultimately, teachers must accept that we do not have all the answers; we must question what we know and be open to uncertainty (Greene, 1988).

As Maxine Greene (1988) noted, we live in a world in which freedom is under attack by neoliberalism. Some have even likened neoliberalism to a “species of fascism” because it has infiltrated all aspects of government and culture (Cadelli, 2016). Under such an attack against citizens, particularly children, we have no moral option but to fight back against this oppression (Giroux, 2004). As a teacher, a citizen, and member of the human species; I believe it is my ethical duty to resist a school environment that is toxic to my students, my community, and myself. Paulo Freire reminds us that educators are responsible for the hopes and dreams of

others; we have a greater ethical responsibility to protect people from exploitation (Freire & Freire, 2013). To be ethical is to challenge neoliberalism: “The freedom of commerce cannot be ethically higher than the freedom to be human” (Freire & Freire, 2013, location 2039). As advocates for our students, we must also become activists; we must also imagine what could be if we were free (Ayers, 2004, 2011; Freire, 1998; Greene, 1988). Critical theory helps us to identify the obstacles that serve to oppress, repress, and suppress us. Rhizomatic theory provides a theory of resistance – one which overcomes barriers, seizes opportunities, and promotes creativity, growth, and community.

#### **Rhizomatic Theory and Resistance.**

In public education, the primary weapon of those in power is neoliberalism. By reducing everything to an economic value, neoliberalism elevates positivism, standardization, and accountability to new heights. It becomes management through fear of not measuring up. It employs economic policies that negatively impact students. Designed to identify students, teachers, and schools as not meeting standards; accountability measures restrict students’ access to educational resources and penalize teachers and schools. It allows for the systematic dismantling of public education and encourages the construction of privatized corporately-owned schools at the expense of our democracy and freedom.

But wherever there is oppression, there is also resistance. While critical theory identifies structures of power, rhizomatic theory provides a framework resistance. Rhizomatic theory extends between and beyond artificial constructs of place and space found in schools and, in doing so, disrupts power constructs. It is a framework that emphasizes connectivity, acentricity, creativity, and growth. It offers planes of resistance from which students, teachers, and schools can disrupt the repression of teachers’ voices, the oppression of students and teachers, and the

suppression of non-dominant perspectives. In short, it provides a place for abundance. It is a way of thinking that reaches through barriers, into opportunities, and beyond artificial constructs. To employ rhizomatic theory and nomadic thought is to allow one's imagination to break through the rigid constraints of traditional schooling in order to allow students space to grow into themselves.

To envision what schools could become when designed to encourage rhizomatic energies, I began by looking for existing barriers in schools that restrict exploration, growth, creativity, and connectivity and, like the eager rhizome, I found places of opportunity. These offshoots of my imagination are presented here as places and spaces of abundance. Seen through a framework of rhizomatic theory, I envision students and teachers as rhizomatic nodules responding to environmental stimuli with each following his or her flight of desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). To continue the metaphor, these rhizomes (provided a space of loose and rich humus) expand in all directions, breaking through barriers, stretching out, connecting, overlapping, and growing stronger. The rhizome becomes the “most radical alternative” to traditional education (Illich, 1970/2013). Smothered in concrete or clay, rhizomes seek out places of growth and resistance (as we all do), but students (and rhizomes) will never be as resilient or as empowered as when they have space to grow.

Given the freedom to explore and connect, the rhizomatic student becomes a creative force – one who is firmly rooted and connected to its environment – and who strengthens herself and her community through these connections. This is presented as a utopian school similar in many ways to the progressive schools imagined by John Dewey (1933). It is a place where students interact with people of all ages, where students and educators gather in nature, where

schools are intimate communal places, where surroundings are comfortable and aesthetically appealing, and where areas are provided for students to experience hands-on learning.

### **Progressive Schools – Past and Present**

Progressive schools of today meet many of these characteristics mentioned above; yet most are private – not public – schools. As education historian and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch notes, progressive schools embodied an “attitude, a belief in experimentation, a commitment to the education of all children and to democracy in schools” (1983, p. 44). Championed by John Dewey, progressive schools were child-centered, experiential, and reflective of a democratic society. Dewey advocated hands-on learning centered on the child’s interests and needs in the “spirit of social cooperation and community life” (1902/1990). In today’s progressive schools

It means basing instruction on the needs, interests, and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discover and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality. (Labaree, 2005, p. 276).

Progressivism disrupts neoliberalism as its focus is on the student’s needs and interests rather than on the economic needs of those in power. The emphasis on projects of student and social relevancy -- combined with an emphasis on community, cooperation, respect, justice, and democracy – are at odds with a neoliberal philosophy that fosters competition, fear, and narcissism. Not only does neoliberalism work through schools to create a docile and anxious



citizenry, it also promotes the corporatization of public education and the opportunity for those in power to wrest control and profit from public schools.

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming pressure for schools to be financially accountable for turning out a standard product has been the death of many a progressive school. Our local school boards are now dominated by businessmen (Callahan, 1962). Our state and federal politicians are predominately older White men who do not want to see the status quo challenged. The current educational system benefits corporate interests and, hence, the interests of politicians. Given the Trump administration's corporate focus, it is unlikely that progressive schools will emerge in the near future unless, of course, the public rises up against the neoliberal agenda as the activists in the Blue Wave have done.

As an educator and an activist, I am an optimist. I note that many progressive schools' innovations were successful and ended not because they failed, but because of political pressure (Semel & Sadovnik, 2006). The following imaginings include not only innovations incorporated by past and existing progressive schools, but additional suggestions for enhancing creativity, community, and environmental stewardship.

#### **Artificial Barriers**

Public schools as we know them today reflect the emphasis on industrial efficiency and social engineering reminiscent of 100 years ago. The goal – to control the masses, save money, and harness human capital (Callahan, 1962). This is in harsh contrast to a curriculum of possibilities. The goal of a curriculum of possibilities is to encourage growth, creativity, and relationships between people and the environment. To do so, we must look at the ways in which serve as barriers to learning so that we can find alternate lines of educational flight.

At the present, public schools are designed to isolate, segregate, and surveil its subjects (Foucault, 1977). Students and teachers are separated from the community in special buildings called schools. We are separated from nature and live within walls made of concrete and metal. Access to the outdoors is limited. Windows, if there are any, are sealed shut. Classrooms and hallways are lit by fluorescent lights. Floors are linoleum or industrial carpet. It is a sterile environment reproducing sterility. It is made for sorting and processing. It is not conducive to the ways of life, to the ways of the rhizome. My students, however, are living organic beings who move and think rhizomatically. They congregate between classes in the central crossroad of the major hallways or in the concrete courtyard. They seek each other out. They look for opportunities to connect with their friends; they seek avenues to resist the obstructions in the way of their pursuits.

To educate – from the Greek root *educere* – means to bring out, to lead forth. Its etymology suggests the rhizome which not only extends out of its nodule but also creates places of opportunity. Schools, then, should be places where students are encouraged to extend themselves out and into places and spaces of thought. To design a school which encourages rhizomatic growth would suggest a curriculum that is “always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). Like the rhizome itself, a curriculum of possibilities embraces connectivity and growth. Rooted in a nurturing environment conducive to growth, a curriculum of possibilities offers becomes a place of freedom, curiosity, imagination, creativity, and community.

### Places of Possibility

**Multiple Entries & Exits.** In a deficit curriculum, students are forced from a very young age to adapt to arbitrary places of entry and exit designed to control rather than liberate. Some of these entry places are temporal and include the number of years spent in school, the seasonal starts and stops of school, and the beginnings and ends of learning periods. Some of the entries and exits are physical (i.e. students must be physically located within a place inside a bricks and mortar school.) Some of these entries and exits limit our access to connections outside the school walls, and some limit access to experiences. This “design flaw” (Aronson, 1995, p. 9) becomes a time prison. Grouped by age, all students are expected to master the material at the same rate. Some fail to master the material and will either be pushed off the conveyor belt or pushed ahead regardless of the gaps in their understanding. Over time, these gaps in understanding become larger. Others who master the material will be left to wait for their classmates to catch up. Teachers are similarly constrained. There is no time available for professional development, collaboration with peers, or planning and development of instruction.

**Compulsory Attendance.** School begins for most students at age five with entry to kindergarten. This is an arbitrary age requirement serving to control access and define readiness. Due to compulsory attendance laws, most students will continue on this efficient and mandatory conveyor belt through the subsequent grades and will be allowed to leave public school after 13 years upon their graduation. Many, of course, will re-enter academia and continue on to college and graduate school; however, for most of us there is one place of entry – kindergarten – and one place of exit – graduation from high school. By defining an age when a student must enter school and an age at which s/he must exit, schools restrict the population’s access to formal

education. Certainly, there are children who are ready to enter and exit schools at different times in their lives; however, these options are limited.

**School Calendar and Length of School Day.** From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, the American public school year tripled from 12 weeks per year to 36 (Aronson, 1995). In the U.S., most states now require between 175-180 school days and/or between 900-1,000 instructional hours per year; even though there is no evidence that increasing school time equates with increases in academic performance (Aronson, 1995; Bush, Ryan, & Rose, 2011; Hull & Newport, 2011). In fact, some high academically performing countries such as Finland, Japan and Korea require less instructional time than American schools. In addition, American schools that offer four-day weeks have seen increases in test scores, decreases in disciplinary referrals, and improved moral and collaboration between teachers (Hull & Newport, 2011). Clearly, a fixed number of school days and instructional hours is not the panacea some school reformers believe, but alternatives to the traditional five-days a week, 180 days a year, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. schedule may result in happier students and teachers and opportunities for improved instruction and learning.

**Eliminating Time as a Boundary.** In 1991, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning (NECTL) studied the relationship between instructional time and student learning. Their report, *Prisoners of Time* (Education Commission of the States, 1994/2005), provides guidelines for ways to re-design how time is used in public schools. These guidelines reflect the many concepts inherent in a curriculum of possibilities. The first suggestion is that schools be re-designed so that “time becomes a factor supporting learning, not a boundary marking its limits” (Aronson, 1995, p. 10). This guideline is indicative of an ethics of care, a respect for diversity, and an encouragement of an individual’s unique talents, abilities, and interests.

Students should be allowed to advance based on their mastery of the material, not based on their time spent in class. The report also recommends schools stay open longer to meet the needs of children and communities and that schools give the teachers the time they need to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development (Education Commission of the States, 2005).

Providing time flexibility encourages opportunities for creativity and innovation, collaboration, and enhanced opportunities for students and teachers to engage with others outside the brick and mortar construct of the school. Students should be placed in classes based on their level of skill not based on age and that high school graduation should be dependent on meeting performance standards rather than on Carnegie units or seat time. Schools can become places of learning for all citizens and need not be confined to an industrial model designed 100 years ago. If we seek to create lifelong learners, why do we close the door to public education when a student reaches a certain age? I'm sure there are many adults who would appreciate educational enrichment who perhaps did not have the opportunity or readiness when they were younger. If we use time in different ways, we can provide the space and flexibility students, teachers, and communities need.

***Learning Outside the Bell and Outside the Bell Curve.*** Like many high school teachers, I've noticed that tardiness, absenteeism, and sleepiness are characteristic of my early morning classes. While many may attribute this to students' cell phone texting or video gaming, there is sufficient evidence to support the fact that students' bedtimes and wake up times are the result of hormonal changes that begin in puberty and will reverse in humans' early 20s. Beginning at around the ages of 10-12 (around the time puberty begins), children's circadian rhythms shift by about two hours. This two-hour shift makes it difficult for them to fall to sleep before 11:00 p.m. As a result, many students in middle and high school suffer from sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation

not only makes students groggy, cranky, and insensitive; but it carries with it significant health risks. People who suffer from sleep deprivation are more likely to suffer from depression, impulsivity, hypertension, diabetes, and obesity and are more likely to get hurt in an accident (Foster, 2013). Based on this (and my 17-years of experience teaching teenagers) and assuming a nine-hour per night sleep requirement, students between the ages of 10-20 years old would benefit by having schools begin at 10:00 a.m. A study of 29 schools that shifted their schedules to accommodate the sleep requirements of their students met with beneficial results – increases in attendance and graduation rates (McKeever & Clark, 2017). The early start times for adolescents represent an obstacle that hurts our students emotionally, physically, and academically. In a rhizomatic school, start times would be modifiable and designed to adapt to the needs of our students.

***Nomad Time.*** I envision rhizomatic schools as being places where time is significantly less restrictive than it is in the traditional public school. If we provide multiple places of entry and exit, we would need to allow for students to enter and exit school based on their desire to learn – not based on their chronological age nor on a society that is training them to live in the 9-5 workplace. I am an early bird and naturally rise at 5:30 most days. What if schools offered courses at different times of the day so that students could choose to attend when they were most likely to be alert? What if we broke through the restrictions of the 9-5 day and schools were open to the community all year and from dawn to dusk? What if students of all ages were invited to participate? What if students left school when they were ready to leave and not based on how many Carnegie units they had earned? By offering courses throughout the year and at different times of day and different days of the week, I believe we would provide students with flexible

and personalized options and that this would result in students who are more engaged and empowered in their own education.

**Breaking Down the Walls.** John Dewey (1897) asserted that schools should be forms of community life. Schools are not, nor should they be, separated from community life; and given our electronic connectability with one another through cell phones and the Internet, our opportunities to connect with people outside our schools and our communities has never been greater. Why then, do we continue to isolate our students? As I've learned through my experiences with my graduate cohort, my women's activist group, and life experiences in general; we benefit from the collaborating and learning with and from others. Yet instead, we've segregated our students from each other and from subject area specialists who live and work beyond the walls of the school. Similarly, academic disciplines have been diced up into tidy subject areas discreet from one another. It is as if we are hoarding our subject knowledge for fear of someone else stealing it from us, and yet of course, we cannot run out of knowledge. Knowledge is not a commodity and yet it is treated as one in a neoliberal society (Lévy, 1977).

Collective intelligence is less concerned with the self-control of human communities than with a fundamental letting-go that is capable of altering our very notion of identity and the mechanisms of domination and conflict, lifting restrictions on heretofore banned communications and effecting the mutual liberation of isolated thoughts." (Lévy, 1977, p. xxvii).

When we (and by "we" I mean society) work together to support students' knowledge by teaching through multiple disciplines and perspectives and by making connections to and with life in our communities, we provide them with meaningful educational experiences.

*Interconnecting with Nature.* Derrick Jensen (2004). notes that “what you value is what you create” (p. 261). If this is true, it appears that schools are places where industrialization is what we value. Buildings are designed to be efficient and economical. Little emphasis is placed on the physical comfort or aesthetics of public schools. Little attention is given to the exterior of the building and even less to the interiors. Those of us who live in schools are isolated from fresh air, beauty, and oftentimes, even sunlight. The message – the hidden curriculum – is that efficiency and economy take precedent. The null curriculum message is that beauty and nature don’t matter.

Our connection to nature is essential to our understanding of our connection to one another and to our environment. Not only is this supported by the framework provided by rhizomatic theory, but when we become aware of our interconnectivity to the rest of the world and our interdependence with it, it becomes essential that we employ an ethics of care. This is one reason to promote the creation of gardens, greenhouses, orchards, and open green spaces in schools and in communities. My sister, a certified Master Gardener, tells me that “gardening is an act of hope.” Hope surely is needed these days and while gardens can be used pedagogically in the teaching of math, science, art, and literature; gardens also teach the gardener an appreciation for life and the gift of patience. As Robert Pogue Harrison (2008) notes, gardeners and those like gardeners “invest themselves in a future of which they will in part be the authors, though they will not be around to witness its unfolding” (p.37). For this reason, teachers are much like gardeners, but our students also benefit by learning that not all our efforts come into fruition immediately – sometimes, the fruits of our labors take years to ripen but may have long-lasting impact. An additional lesson learned by gardening is that the best work often requires that we give more than we receive and do not judge our efforts by their economic return (Harrison,



2008). This concept is in sharp contrast to an acquisitive “what’s in it for me society,” but it is imperative that we share the importance of care and patience with students.

The creation and tending to gardens provide us with places of “rehumanization in the midst of, or in spite of, the forces of darkness” (Harrison, 2008, p. 71). Gardens become havens--places for reflection and meditation – not only because they resonate with beauty and stimulate our senses, but because they are microcosms of life. They remind us that we are not the center of the universe but rather we are “a small part of a big family” (Jensen, 2004, p. 164). I envision schools in which gardens, greenhouses, and green spaces provide respite from the metal and concrete structures that are our schools and places where students can cultivate places full of life: “If everyone nurtured a seedling and plated it, they would be building their new church” (Jensen, 2004, p. 164). How much better to honor and revere as places which sustain us and to which we are both interconnected and interdependent than to see nature as resources to be harvested and consumed.

**Eco-Justice and Democracy.** Bowers (2001) suggests an eco-justice curriculum as a way to address how humankind is impacted by the destructiveness of neoliberal rationality and “the monoculture of consumerism” (p. 149). Unlike neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual, an eco-justice curriculum emphasizes interdependence of diverse cultures and the environment. It demands exploration of issues of processes and relationships, the community’s relationship with the ecology of place, and the complexity of the interdependencies of life-giving processes (Bowers, 2001). It is an acentral perspective with rhizomatic threads connecting traditional ethnic practices with an awareness and understanding of local ecosystems. Students come to understand how certain types of cultural knowledge are privileged while others (such as care, support, and intergenerational face-to-face communication) are not. This creates respect for

community elders and indigenous knowledge and encourages connections between cultures and generations. It empowers students to have a greater understanding of the knowledge necessary to lead less consumer-oriented lives (Bowers, 2001). One of the key tenets of eco-justice is teaching students how to assess the ways in which the dominant culture encourages a curriculum of deficit rather than possibilities. By becoming critically conscious of how Western culture encourages practices which discourage connectivity, care, and creativity; students can begin to see how life-sustaining practices found through relationships, diversity, creativity, and aesthetics promote and encourage not only our survival, but also our joy.

**Connecting Through the Arts.** The arts provide us with ways of communicating through and with one another in ways that surpass the restrictions of language and which heighten our perspectives of the world. Through the arts, we reach out to through music, dance, and art to connect on a level that is physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental. Art evokes our senses and our emotions in ways which transcend time and place. Art puts us in the moment. When I am listening to classical guitarist, Andrés Segovia, I engage in a dialogue with him and am enthralled. Likewise, when I am painting, my artwork and I are in the process of becoming – there is nothing outside of the two of us – creator and creation. In the arts, we are given permission and are encouraged to experiment and “to surrender to the impulses the work sends to the maker, as well as those sent from the maker to the work” (Eisner, 2002, location 115).

In essence, the arts are rhizomatic; they demand creativity and adaptability. Unlike neoliberal rationality, the arts don't demand efficiency or a financial return on our investment. Unlike a curriculum of deficit, a curriculum of possibilities embraces imagination, for imagination awakens us to possibilities (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995). It allows us to not only see how things are, but to also see how things might be. Maxine Greene (1995) suggests imagination

invites the ethical concerns necessary to be awake to “what it is to be in the world” (p. 35).

Artists look at the world closely and from non-dominant perspectives. This ability, to see the world from multiple perspectives, represents not only the importance of cultivating diversity in thought, but also at the creative opportunities provided through imagination. The arts disrupt the neoliberal rationality of our culture and instead embrace uncertainty, connectivity, and the figurative versus the literal (Eisner, 2002). This is in sharp contrast to a neoliberal rationality that prioritizes data, technology, and the individual. Eisner (2002) reminds us that the tools we give our students influence their thoughts. A neoliberal education emphasizes tools of quantification and reduces students and their world to places of economic exchange. The tools used in the arts are non-reductive and teach students there are no limits to where their imaginations can take them.

**Making E-Connections.** Similarly, technology provides ways for us to interconnect, to collaborate, and to re-imagine our world (Lévy, 1997). The world wide web is an electronic rhizome connecting users all over the world and even into outer space, yet public schools have been hesitant to fully embrace these educational opportunities. It seems that schools want to control students’ access to computers or the abundancies of knowledge represented by the internet. For example, at the high school where I teach, we have approximately 2,200 students but only around 300 computers. We have internet access controlled by a wireless network that limits students’ and teachers’ access to “forbidden” sites. The only courses students may take on-line and at no cost are courses they have previously failed. These credit recovery courses are free, but the student must take them at school and on school computers. Students may also enroll in on-line courses offered during the summer, but these courses are fairly expensive -- \$525.00 for 1 credit hour.

Given the abundant massive open online courses (MOOCs) available at no cost through the internet, it is astonishing to me that schools are not looking at ways to use MOOCs to engage students' curiosity and interest. MOOCs are free, offer flexible timing, and a diverse offering of courses. For example, a quick search of [www.mooc.org](http://www.mooc.org) revealed a listing over 1,800 courses. Instruction is led by professors at over 50 U.S. and international universities including Harvard, Dartmouth, University of California – Berkeley, Rice, Imperial College London, Juilliard, McGill, and the Sorbonne. All courses are free and some offer college credit. While MOOCs may not currently offer courses developmentally accessible to all public school students, they do provide a model of how MOOCs could be utilized by public schools. If our goal is to educate our citizens, then why do we not provide them with every opportunity to reach beyond the concrete and metal walls of our public schools and into the classrooms of experts world-wide (Lévy, 1997)?

**Tapping into Community.** Not only does the internet provide places for students to expand their lines of flight, but by integrating schools with our communities we can also reach out to subject area specialists in our neighborhoods. For example, a friend of mine is an author and a subject expert in the American civil war and a Vietnam veteran. He is also a former reporter for an international news network. When my students study the civil war or the Vietnam war, I have Campbell visit. The students are excited to have a guest speaker and he provides them with a perspective on war that I could not. He can also answer their questions about writing and journalism. Campbell, who is retired, enjoys interacting with the students and we are all enriched by this experience; and because he lives in the community, it helps us to see the ways in which we connect and support one another. With over 2,000 students in my high school

the opportunity to engage parents, family, and members of the community expand exponentially and offer a heightened awareness of each member's importance to our social eco-system.

**Apprenticeships & Work-Study.** Ever since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it seems like there has been considerable pressure on all students to attend college. This is particularly true at my school, and those children who are not academically inclined have a difficult time finding their place in our college-oriented culture. Years ago, students were sorted onto academic or vocational tracks depending upon their academic achievement. These determinations were made on the basis of standardized tests with little if any input from the student. In time, tracking got a bad reputation; but rather than removing the sorting mechanism, schools removed the vocational course offerings.

The implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) demanded schools provide data that students were achieving academically. Student performance in vocational and technology courses are assessed qualitatively, not through standardized tests and therefore these courses became to be seen as less important. In time, NCLB was misinterpreted as “all children go to college.” Students who were not interested in college were perceived as having less value than those more academically inclined. Doors closed to them. Vocational pathways disappeared. Not surprisingly, enrollment in vocational/technical courses in high schools decreased from 21% in 1982 to 16% in 1992 (U.S. Department of Education). This is tragic given that these courses provided places of opportunity to all students, but particularly to those belonging special populations including lower socio-economic groups, students with disabilities, students with low GPAs, and students with limited English-speaking proficiency who may not be identified as “meeting the standards” (U.S. Department of Education). For example, flexible vocational experiences are limited in Georgia. Although 17 career “clusters” are listed on the GaDoE

website, most schools offer half that amount. In my school district, schools offer 5-12 “clusters” with schools in more affluent areas providing fewer vocational options than those in lower socio-economic areas.

Schools must provide openings to career exploration and training. Apprenticeship and internship programs provide hands-on real-life experience and allow students to explore careers. It also allows students to build relationships with people in their community who provide services and goods. It gives students an authentic understanding of a typical workday and a genuine appreciation for the labor and skills required. This real-life experience fosters respect and community. Based on feedback from participating employers of Georgia’s apprenticeship program, it appears they were very satisfied with the apprentice’s work and the program in general. Casual discussions I’ve had with employers in my community suggest they would be very responsive to providing opportunities for young people to observe, learn, and practice a trade. Yet the number of YAP customer satisfaction surveys decreased from 919 in 2004 to 221 in 2014 suggesting that significantly fewer students are participating in this program (Georgia Department of Education). Part of the problem for the reduction in apprentices may be a result of the program’s understaffing – Six YAP coordinators manage the entire state of Georgia. It could be the result of rigid requirements: detailed training plans, identification of specific workplace skills, workplace mentoring, instruction in workplace competencies as well as “all aspects of a chosen industry,” and 720 hours of on-the-job training (GaDoE). In addition, students must excel in academic and job performance and school and workplace behavior. These requirements are onerous. It is no surprise that participation has decreased even though satisfaction with participating employers is high.

Perhaps a better way would be to work with students to identify careers of interest and then make arrangements for students to meet with potential employers in the presence of parents and school guidance counselors to provide a safe way for students to explore career options without having to commit to 720 hours of on-the-job training and without the employer having to create detailed training plans. This would allow students to explore life outside the school and enter into relationships with people in the community.

**Makerspaces.** Makerspaces are a relatively new phenomena representative of people's natural design to connect and create. These creative spaces were given a boost by former President Obama (2009) who encouraged Americans to be creators, not just consumers. Today, there are approximately 135 million Americans who are part of the maker movement (Bajarin, 2014). In makerspaces, people come together to share ideas, knowledge, and tools. In effect, makerspaces embody collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997). They emerge from people's places of shared interest, and such, they are places of rhizomatic activity. They democratize access to education, technology, and professional tools necessary to make almost anything (Peppler & Bender, 2013). These spaces are designed to provide opportunities for the community to have access to other like-minded creative types and the equipment necessary to bring their ideas to fruition. Makerspaces bring together people with an abundant range of interests and are as diverse as the people who use them. There are makerspaces centered around technology, fabrication, arts and crafts, eco-sustainability, cooking, woodworking, and mechanical repair. Maker spaces provide an open learning environment and creators enter and exit the makerspace based upon their individual needs and desires. Makerspaces are also connected rhizomatically to the larger maker movement through seminars, conventions, MakerFaires (local, national, and

international gatherings), subscriptions to periodicals, and on-line communities (Peppler & Bender, 2013).

Most importantly, makerspaces offer a way to re-think and transform our approach to education. Rather than looking at education as a consumable – a banking of information; maker offer an orientation towards the creative and the communal. Like the rhizome, these spaces are acentral. They reflect the creative desire of the maker. Makerspaces are organically created and spring from the needs and desires of the community. Because they are open to the public, they provide a place for people from diverse backgrounds to learning from and create with one another. There is no “sage on the stage” and people of all ages and abilities work together to share their passion, knowledge, and ideas. Makers experience challenges while creating their works, but – like the rhizome – these obstacles become barriers to be overcome through one’s own persistence, but also through the support of those in the maker network. Because maker spaces are public places open to all, they provide spaces for people of all generations and cultures to work collaboratively to spark new ideas, relationships, and creations. Not surprisingly, many schools, universities, and libraries are opening spaces for makers to collaborate and innovate.

**Building Community.**

The previous paragraphs examine ways to re-imagine public schools and their approaches to restrictions of time, place, access, orientation, and ethics; but rhizomatic theory also demands space for equality, acentricity, opportunity and democracy. Rhizomatic theory does not promote hierarchies of power, nor does it encourage the narcissism so prevalent in neoliberal rationality. In rhizomatic theory, we are stronger when we join together and we are more productive when we are given the freedom to grow. John Dewey (1902, 1916), Maxine Greene (1988), Bill



Schubert (2009), and Brian Schultz (2017) all promote the idea that schools should be places of discovery, engagement, creativity, and democracy.

Dewey (1916) promoted schools as places where democratic ideals are lived and practiced. He noted that when people work together to solve a problem, it is “equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory” which keep us from enjoying our full potential (Dewey, 1916, location 1406). One way to encourage interaction in democratic ideals and address society’s problems is through social action curriculum projects (SACP). SACPs offer students opportunities to create their own learning while engaging in democratic processes which benefit the community. In an SACP, teachers engage students in problem-solving by using Freirean (2000) strategies encouraging students to identify problems in their community. Students then generate project ideas based upon their own interests and concerns. Teachers act as guides, but do not manage the project. It is up to the student to navigate the process, overcome barriers, adapt to conditions, and identify solutions. SACPs are the epitome of rhizomatic theory as project ideas as they are driven by the student’s desire and require that students venture out in order to explore the problem they seek to solve (Schultz, 2017). SACPs also expand students’ *conscientização* (Freire, 2000) beyond themselves and out into their communities. By engaging with their communities, they expand their social networks, their understanding of the world, and grow from it. SACPs encourage critical thinking, individual empowerment, and democratic ideals.

### **Threads of Thought**

Because rhizomatic theory is one of diversity and creativity, my ideas on how to create schools using this framework emerged organically – creative offshoots as it were. I employed my imagination looking to “see how things could be otherwise” if the artificial barriers that limit us

were removed so that we might connect more deeply and meaningfully with ourselves, our students, our communities, and our environment (Greene, 1995, p. 35). Not all of these ideas are plausible, yet they offer a “consciousness of possibility” (Greene, 1997, p. 117) for further exploration and lines of flight (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1986). It is not enough to simply name that which oppresses us. To change schools, we must be able to imagine what could be. Teaching is, after all, an act of hope; and to hope, requires a vision.

## Epilogue

Like the rhizome, I began this journey bearing the weight of oppression and seeking opportunities for growth. In pursuit of this “line of flight,” my research has revealed complex layers of control employed to compress students into standardized products from which those in power can wring a profit. It was discouraging, as the obstacles are great. Each overlapping layer of societal, economic, and political control places additional weight upon the student and teacher until both struggle to survive. We become suffocated by a system that seeks to control us. It becomes difficult to even imagine alternatives to our current public education system given the ways in which we’ve been brainwashed to believe in the foundations of a system which reduces students and teachers to numeric values. We cling to hierarchical organizational systems, segregated curricula, and neoliberal valuations because we can no longer think for ourselves. Many of us are unaware of the ways in which we have become cogs in the neoliberal school machine – a system cannibalizing our youth.

Constrained by a system that has become toxic to students, teachers, and communities; we must continue to look for alternative routes of resistance and possibilities for change. We owe this to our students, our communities, and our planet. When teachers are “on the students’ side” (Ayers, 2004, p. 66), we have no choice but to fight against capitalists’ interests in transforming our children into commodities rather than human beings. Yes, classrooms are places of resistance; however, we must also engage outside of schools to politically and socially effect change. I believe teachers have an ethical obligation to demonstrate and testify to the importance of struggle in democracy and to “demythologize the authoritarianism of programmed teaching and their administration” (Freire, 1998, location 741).

Based on my experience with my women's progressive group, Blue Wave, rhizomatic theory can provide a framework with which to challenge neoliberalism and authoritarianism. It offers a resistance, creativity, and community. Blue Wave demonstrated to me the power of like-minded people working together in solidarity for a common cause. The diversity, creativity, and energy of our members has not waned since our emergence over a year ago. Of the 14 members who have chosen to run for political office, seven won their elections in December 2017. We won't know the outcome of the other races until the midterm elections of 2018; however, I am confident that 4,500 women working together will result in progressive change. I look at the love, energy, and talents of these women and I see what is possible for our students, our schools, our communities, and our nation when we are motivated by love rather than profit. This may sound too optimistic, too naïve; yet I've seen what can happen when people refuse to be afraid, refuse to be silent, and refuse to color within the lines.

When we look at the world rhizomatically, we seek to overcome barriers; we look for places of growth and connectivity. It is problem-solving at the most personal level. When we think rhizomatically about public education, we acknowledge the strata of systemic restraints and challenge their benefit to our students. We look for ways of finding cracks in the foundation in order to break through these fissures and create an educational system that is organic, acentral, and interconnected to all things. Given the current political climate, it will require educators, parents, students, and citizens to build alliances, to think creatively, and to resist those powerful elites who want nothing more than to enslave us economically and consume the resources of our planet regardless of the consequences.

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